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THE HEART OF THUNDER MOUNTAIN

"He tried to shoot once more, into the very face of the oncoming brute."—FRONTISPIECE. *See Page 245.*

THE HEART OF THUNDER MOUNTAIN

BY

EDFRID A. BINGHAM

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY

ANTON OTTO FISCHER

TORONTO
THE COPP, CLARK COMPANY
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THE HEART OF THUNDER MOUNTAIN

CHAPTER I

THE FORBIDDEN PASTURE

SHE sat hunched up in the middle of the silent pasture, where the tall, thin grass ran ripening before the breeze in waves the hue of burnished bronze. Her cow pony grazed greedily a few yards away, lifting his head now and then to gaze inquiringly at her, and then returning to his gluttony with a satisfied snort, commendatory of this long rest. The girl had removed her small sombrero to adjust the masses of tawny hair that had become disordered in her morning ride; and the breeze now played with it, and the sun sought out its glints of gold. She was fair, of a curiously rich complexion with soft golden tints beneath the skin, as if the rusty gold in her hair was just the outcropping of what ran in solution in her veins. And there was a certain air about her that contrasted strangely with the scene upon which she now gazed intently, with her head bent forward, and her hands clasped round her upthrust knees.

It was a little valley she had come upon by chance, snugly tucked away among the hills. Below the bronze-colored slope there were lush meadows of a brilliant

green, and a shallow, swift stream that flashed over black bowlders and white sand; beyond the meadows lay more shining pastures rising to pale-green aspen groves and then to dark-green pines; and above all these the foothills climbed swiftly to the mountains, and the mountains more swiftly to the sky. There were faint blue mists in the foothills, fainter violet shadows on the distant fields, an icy whiteness on the peaks; and in the sky no more than two small puffs of cloud like eider-down adrift in the depths of blue. What at first had seemed an utter silence laid upon that summer landscape had now become, as she looked and listened, a silence full of sound; of that indefinable humming undertone of nature maturing in the sun; of insects busy at their harvest; of birds in the distance calling; of grasses rustling in the breeze; of pines on the long ridge droning like an organ in the Recessional.

Yes, it was very beautiful, she thought. And sweet. And peaceful. She had come a long way — halfway across the great continent — to find that peace. But why should there be a touch of sadness in all that beauty? And why should there be need to search for her handkerchief to press against her eyes? For the first time since she had come to Paradise Park she felt a little lonely, a little doubtful about the wisdom of her brave revolt.

She sank back at last, and lay curled up in the grass with her head pillowed on one bent arm. There, to her half-closed eyes, the grass seemed like a fairy forest, soon peopled by her fancy, the fancy of a girl who still retained the quick imagination of a child. An Indian paintbrush flamed at her with barbaric passion; nodding

harebells tinkled purple melodies; and a Mariposa lily with a violet eye seemed like a knight in white armor, bowing himself into her outstretched hand. Her eyelids drooped more and more. The music of the pines and the murmur of the pasture blended in a faint and fading lullaby. . . .

Tuesday's shrill neigh awakened her. She sat up shivering, for the warm air was underlaid with cold; and quivering, for the alarm had fallen pat upon the climax of her dream. She rubbed her eyes, a little blinded by the sunlight, and saw that Tuesday stood with head high and nostrils distended, gazing past her toward the upper end of the pasture. She was not surprised, being yet under the spell of her dream-fairyland, to see a horseman galloping straight toward her. If not the white knight, then — For some seconds she stared, awakening slowly; and smiled at length at her childish fancy. It was only a cowboy, doubtless, riding upon his own prosaic business. And yet — She became gradually aware of something unusual, something disquieting in the manner of the man's approach. The horse was leaping under the spurs; the rider sat upright and alert in the saddle; and suddenly, as she watched him, the man's hand went to his hip, and there was a gleam of metal in the sun.

She was not afraid. Seth Huntington had assured her there was nothing to be feared in Paradise Park. But for all that, it was not without uneasiness that she hastily arranged the meager folds of her divided skirt, and passed her hands quickly over the still disordered masses of her hair. And then he was fairly upon her,

reining up with a jerk that brought the sweating pony back upon its haunches.

There was an angry glitter in the man's dark eyes, his face was black with passion, and the bright object she had seen flashing in his hand was the twin brother of Huntington's six-shooter. He was roughly, even meanly, dressed. His coarse blue flannel shirt was unbuttoned at the throat; his soiled brown corduroy trousers were thrust unevenly into dusty and wrinkled boot tops; his old, gray hat was slouched over one side of his forehead, shading his eyes. But the face beneath that faded and disreputable hat, as Marion saw with a slight thrill of curiosity, belonged to no ranch hand or cow-puncher. Whoever he might be, and whatever he might be doing there scowling at her, she felt at once that he was as foreign as herself to that neighborhood. But there was no time at that moment to analyze her feeling, to formulate her thought. And her next impression, following very swiftly, was one of vague antagonism. She felt that she was going to hate him.

"What new trick is this?" he demanded angrily, when he had looked from the girl to her pony, and at her again, with unconcealed suspicion.

For a moment she was undecided whether to answer him sharply or to rebuke his incivility with silence.

"I don't know!" she replied at last, by way of compromise between her two impulses, with a half-playful emphasis on the "I," accompanied by a very solemn shaking of the head and a very innocent widening of the eyes.

There was a pause while he searched her face with a distrustful scrutiny.

"You're not just the person I was looking for," he said finally, with a touch of irony.

"How fortunate!" she replied, in a tone that was like a mocking echo of his own.

Her eyes met his unflinchingly, a little impudently, telling him nothing; then they slowly fell, and rested on the revolver in his hand. With a shrug he thrust the weapon into its holster.

"Thank you!" she said sweetly. "You really won't need it."

He jerked his head impatiently.

"How did you get in here?" he demanded, quite as roughly as before.

There was no reason in the world why she should not have answered him simply and directly; but she did not. She was exasperated, not so much by his words as by his manner, and not so much by his manner even as by something provocative in the man himself. He was rude, but it was not his rudeness that most annoyed her. She scarcely knew what it was,— perhaps a certain indifference, a certain cold contempt that she detected underlying all his anger, a certain icy and impenetrable reserve that, for all his hot words, and for all his lowering looks, she resented most as being in some way personal to her. And instantly the minx in her rose up for mischief.

"By aeroplane, of course!" she said tartly.

It was a silly speech, and she regretted it almost before it had left her lips.

A faint flush came into the enemy's face.

"Spoken like a woman!" he retorted. "Always tragic over little things and flippant over big ones."

That brought the color up into her face. But she was not subdued; for the cat in woman also has nine lives — at least.

"There's my horse," she said, with a toss of her head. "You saw him."

"True! But cow ponies don't easily jump four-wire fences."

"Why should they when the fences are down?"

"Good! We arrive by the devious ways that women love. Perhaps you'll give me the answer now that you should have given in the first place. *How did you get in here?*"

She bit her lip, reflected a moment, and attempted a flank movement.

"My name is Marion Gaylord."

"I knew that."

"But you have never seen me before!"

"No. But that's one of Huntington's horses, and Miss Gaylord is a guest at his house. You see, I am more courteous than you after all. I answer your questions."

"Perhaps I'll answer yours when I know what right you have to ask them."

A light began to dawn upon him.

"Do you mean — you don't know where you are?"

"No."

He gave her a long, searching look before he spoke again.

"My name is Philip Haig," he said, leaning forward with a curious smile.

The result was all that he could have wished for. Until that moment she had remained seated, firm in her

determination not to be disturbed by him. But now she rose slowly to her feet, her face reddening, her lips parted, a frightened look in her eyes. The shoe was on the other foot, with a vengeance.

He saw all this, and without compunction seized his advantage. With a grim smile he threw the reins over the pony's head, swung himself out of the saddle, and stepped toward her. As he came on he removed his dilapidated hat with a gesture that made her forget it was dilapidated,— a mocking, insolent gesture though it was. In spite of her embarrassment she let none of his features escape her quickening interest. She saw that he was tall, erect, alert; handsome in some strange and half-repellent way, with his pale dark face, rather long in contour, and with his black, curly hair matted on the broad forehead. But she almost recoiled when, on his drawing nearer, she saw for the first time — it had been hidden by the shadow of his slouched hat — an ugly scar that ran from the outer corner of his left eye down to the jawbone below the ear. It gave to one side of his face a singularly sinister expression that vanished when he turned and disclosed a profile that was not without nobility and charm.

Then suddenly her mystification was complete. Their eyes met, not as before, but very near, so close had he come to her, still smiling. And instantly, instinctively, she lowered hers; for she felt as if she had been caught peering through a window at something she had no right to see. Yet the next instant she was looking again, half-guiltily, but irresistibly drawn. The eyes were of a curious color,— smoky black, or dark gray-blue, or somber purple,— liquid and deep like a

woman's, but with a steady, dull glow in their depths that was unlike anything she had ever seen or imagined. What was it that burned there? Suffering? Hunger? Evil? Sorrow? Shame? It gave her something to think about for many a day and night. Meanwhile —

"I see you have heard of me," he said mockingly.

She had no reply. She was realizing slowly that she had trespassed, that she had perhaps seriously compromised her cousin, and, most humiliating of all, that she had assumed quite the wrong attitude toward the man.

"You really didn't know you were on my land?" he demanded, with a little less offensiveness in his tone.

"No," she answered weakly.

"And Huntington didn't send you here?"

"No."

"I believe you, of course. But it's rather queer. How did you happen — if you don't mind —"

She did not mind in the least — was eager, indeed, to explain her presence there.

"I'm just learning to ride," she began impulsively. "This was my first venture off the valley road, and I —"

"And you came straight to me!" he exclaimed, chuckling.

At that a strange thing happened. He had meant only that she, the guest and cousin of Seth Huntington, his bitter foe, had blundered straight into the camp of the enemy; and that was a rare joke on Huntington. But she was a girl; her little adventure was already rosy with romance; and the effect of his careless speech was as if he had looked into her heart, and read aloud for her something she had not known was there. To his

surprise and wonder the girl's fair face turned red to the roots of her tawny hair, and a look of helpless confusion came into the clear, blue eyes that until now, for all her embarrassment, had frankly met his own. She looked suddenly away from him.

"You make me ashamed," she said at length, stealing a look at him.

"If you know anything about my difficulty with Huntington," he began, "you'll understand that —"

"I do. I do understand!" she interrupted eagerly. "I don't know much about it — the trouble. They haven't told me. I've only overheard some talk — and I didn't ask. I rode down the valley this morning trying to do it like a cowboy. And there was a branch road — and then the break in the fence — and before I knew it I'd fallen asleep. That's all — except —" She shot a half-mischievous glance at him "— you spoiled a very beautiful dream."

But this was all lost upon him. His face was clouding again.

"Where is it — the break in the fence?"

Chagrined at the failure of her bit of coquetry, she merely pointed in the direction whence she had come.

"Thank you!" he said. "At last!"

With that he went swiftly to his pony, mounted, and started to ride away. But suddenly he reined up again, whirled his horse savagely around, and faced Marion with the sunlight full upon the scarred side of his face, now ugly with menace.

"If that fence has been cut," he said, in a hard and level tone, "it's been cut by Huntington or his men. You tell him for me, please — and you'll be doing *him* a

favor not to forget it — tell him that he's a fool to anger me. I've been very patient in this business, but I don't claim patience as one of my virtues. Do you hear? Tell him he's a fool to anger me!"

She watched him gallop to the gap in the barb-wire fence; she watched him dismount to examine the severed wires; she watched him leap on his horse again, and ride furiously down the road until he was lost to view below the dip in the slope toward the valley. And still for some minutes she stood staring at the place where he had disappeared. Then, left alone with her pent-up emotions, she no longer resisted them. Tears of vexation started in her eyes; chagrin, resentment, anger swept over her in turn. She dug the heel of one small boot into the unoffending soil — his soil — and thrust her clenched hands down at her side.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" she cried, over and over again, striding forward and back across some yards of pasture, trampling lilies and harebells under her heedless feet, turning her flaming face at intervals toward the spot in the smiling landscape that had last held the figure of Philip Haig.

The shame of it! She had never — never — *never* been treated so outrageously. It was unendurable — and she had endured it! She flung herself down on the ground and wept.

Marion was now facing life alone. Her nearest remaining relative was her cousin, Claire Huntington. Her mother — a Southern girl who might have stepped out of a panel by Fragonard, so fine and soft and Old-World-like was her beauty — had died when she was

still a child. Her father, Doctor Gaylord, was the antithesis of the sprite-like creature he had married,— a big, athletic, outdoor sort of man, with truly violent red hair and beard, whose favorite expression about himself had been that a very capable pirate had been sacrificed to make a tolerable physician. But he had prospered in his profession; and then had died with amazing suddenness, leaving his estate in an almost hopeless mess.

Robert Hillyer had tackled the problem,— Robert, the alert, the busy, the supremely confident, the typical money-getter of the money-worshipping metropolis. He had long been deeply in love with Marion, but he had not made great headway in his suit, despite the advantage of Doctor Gaylord's approval. Now, having saved enough out of the estate (for so he said, though he never told Marion the details of that miracle) to provide her with an income barely sufficient to keep her in comfort but not in the luxury to which she had been accustomed, he plainly expected his reward. And this wr , Marion an intolerable situation. She did not love R ert. She liked him, admired him, trusted him; no more. Knowing her father's wishes, she saw the way marked straight before her; for Robert already had wealth, and could and would give her all the material things she desired. Time and again she was on the point of yielding, but something checked her, held her back, as if a voice had whispered in her ear, and strong arms had seized her. She grew restless, discontented, melancholy. And suddenly, on a moment's inspiration, the strangest impulse she had ever known, she had revolted and fled from the scene of her unhappiness, telling

Robert (by letter) only that she must have time to think, and that for six months he must leave her to herself. She had fled to Claire, that cousin on her father's side, who some years before, to the wonder and chagrin of many Gaylords east and west,— to all except the Viking physician, who had rejoiced in her spirit,— had eloped with a cowboy, since turned successful cattleman, whom she had met at the Denver Carnival. Ten days now had Marion been in Paradise Park, rejoicing in her freedom, rejoicing in the half-wild life, rejoicing in the tonic air and the tonic beauty of this Rocky Mountain valley, shut in, isolated, and so aptly named. And only to-day had there come any emotions that disturbed her peace.

When she looked up again her eyes were sharply arrested by a scene that seemed curiously to picture her own mood. Far up at the head of the valley a cloud that was scarcely heavier than a mist came stealing out of a gulch to take its shining way along the range of mountains. Dropping in its flight a shower as light as a bridal veil, it sped glistening across the face of mountain after mountain, softening the stark grays and reds, while above it the peaks gleamed white. On and on it came until at last it arrived at the mouth of a deep, dark gorge in the side of a mountain that, in its strange and forbidding aspect, differed notably from all the others in the majestic range. There it paused as if arrested by some stern command, hung for a moment in palpable agitation, and was swiftly swallowed up in the gorge. And again she had a vague and uneasy feeling, as she had when first she saw it, that Thunder Mountain,— but

she could not fit that feeling into thought, could find no words to frame it. Yet she was fascinated.

It was half-hidden now in surging, black storm-clouds, while all the sharp and snow-clad peaks around it glittered in the sun. Even in those rare moments when it was freed from clouds and mists it stood alone in its peculiar grandeur. Unlike all the others it wore no diadem of snow. Some terrible convulsion of nature, some cataclysm at its birth or in the fiery days of its youth, had left it bald-headed, ugly, and deformed. But for that catastrophe it would have been far loftier than any of its fellows; and even now the hunchback towered among them, its flat head level with their pointed peaks, the most conspicuous figure in the imposing pageant raised against the western sky.

And its deformity was not the whole of its misfortune. It bore the brunt of every tempest that broke upon that massive barrier of mountains. Its granite head was the very breeding-place of storms. The peaks around it had their days of calm, but Thunder Mountain never. An hour or two perhaps — no more. It knew no peace. The elements were, and are now, and forever will be quarreling upon its worn and battered head; lightning and rain and snow and wind are forever hammering and beating it turn by turn. It is the Quasimodo and the Lear and the Gray Friar of mountains, all in one. And if, on some still and perfect day, its tonsured head emerges from the clouds, the watcher in the Park has but to turn his head a moment, and look again, and lo! it wears its gray cowl as before, and stoops growling and grumbling under its endless punishment.

Suddenly, as Marion looked, the silence was rudely

shattered. Roll on roll of thunder swept across the valley, crashed against the hills, rebounded from wall to wall of mountains, until all the Park was filled with the sullen bellowing. And then, amid all the tumult, Marion heard something more,— a voice that mingled with the voice of the mountain, and thrilled her while it filled her with a singular disquietude. She had dismissed Haig from her thoughts. She was sure of that. And yet through all the uproar, and in the tense silence that ensued, she heard his taunting voice:

"And you came straight to me!"

CHAPTER II

THE ROAD TO PARADISE

THE gap in the fence remained exactly as it had been when it invited her to adventure. But now she halted there, dismounted, and picked up the end of a wire that lay trailing on the ground. With new-found interest she examined the fracture, and stared at it in wonder. Dropping it, and kneeling excitedly in the grass, she searched another, and still another wire, and with the same result. Even to her unpractised eye the facts were plain: the four wires had not been broken; they had been cleanly cut, and very recently, as shown by the absence of rust on the severed ends. By whom? And why? Seth Huntington, Haig had said. Impossible! Absurd! True, she had heard Seth denouncing him; Claire also; and without knowing the cause of the feud, or caring, she had learned that Huntington and Haig were bitterly at odds about something,— cattle, she thought, or was it land? But that Seth could have stooped to the low trick implied in these cut wires! And yet —

She looked down the half-made road by which Haig had disappeared. It was quite empty now, save for Tuesday and herself. Nor was there sight of man or beast in all the valley. Haig's cattle, like Seth's and the other ranchmen's, were grazing in the summer pastures, no doubt in little shut-in valleys far up among

the pines yonder, where the violet mists were deepening.

She mounted her horse again, and rode slowly up the hill. But just where the road entered the woods at the summit of the ridge she stopped once more, and turned for a last look at her lost valley. Her gaze swept it lovingly from where, at her left, the long ridge shut off the view, to where, far at her right, the valley narrowed into a pine-screened gulch; and back again almost to the spot where the road dipped and disappeared. There her eyes were suddenly caught by something she had not seen before,— a thin spiral of blue smoke that mounted slowly until it was struck and dissipated by the breeze from across the ridge. Haig's ranchhouse, surely, nestling below the hill! The house would be visible, doubtless, from the place where Haig had vanished from her sight. What would it be like? she wondered.

The next instant she had pulled her pony half-around toward the valley. But Tuesday turned his head, and looked at her; and she felt the blood rushing into her face.

"Go on, Tuesday!" she cried, jerking him back into the road. "What are you doing?"

She rode on into the pines, embarrassed beyond all belief.

In a few minutes she had emerged again from the woods, descended the hill, and regained the main-traveled road along the Brightwater. Still she rode slowly, forgetting that she had learned at last to ride like a cowboy. She was reluctant to return to Huntington's, reluctant to relate her experiences as she had always related them until to-day. Haig had sent a

warning to Huntington. It was her duty to deliver it. But how could she tell just so much and no more? There would be questions. She would be cross-examined, kindly enough but relentlessly. And in some strange way this meeting had become a private matter; Haig's warning was inextricably mixed with other things that did not concern Huntington. Just what these were, and why they were so very private, she could not quite explain to herself; and for the moment she did not try. They were things to be thought about later, when she could think more clearly. She knew only that she should never be able to endure either the banter or the disapproval of Huntington. What did Claire see in him anyhow,— the soft and sensitive Claire, with her blue eyes and her pretty face always upturned so trustfully to him? For the first time she realized that she had distrusted Seth from the beginning.

In the midst of these confused and disconcerting thoughts, she became aware that she was no longer alone in the highway. Slowly as she rode, she was steadily overtaking a group of horsemen that appeared to be in difficulties. At intervals there was a commotion in the group, and clouds of dust from time to time concealed it from her sight. She reined up Tuesday, and hesitated, having had her fill of adventure for one day. Then, as the men seemed to be quite oblivious to her presence, and deeply absorbed in their own affair, curiosity drew her onward; and all her scruples were forgotten when she had ridden near enough to see the cause of the disturbance.

Three men on cow ponies were leading, driving, and avoiding a fourth horse, which was not a cow pony by

any possible extension of the word. This horse, which wore neither saddle nor bridle, but only a rope around his neck, maintained an almost uninterrupted struggle with his guards. At the first near glimpse she caught of him through the dust, Marion uttered an exclamation of surprise and admiration. He was larger than the ponies ridden by the men, larger than any cow pony, yet not a big horse measured by any standard with which she was familiar. His lines were like those of a thoroughbred, and in his movements, for all his fury, there was a lightness, a daintiness, an eloquence that suggested nothing so much as the airy grace of a young girl skipping and dancing across a playground.

But it was his color especially that drew the cry from Marion's lips. This was pale yellow, not the cream color of the familiar buckskin breed, but something golden; of a brilliant luster like gold leaf, but softer; rather like cloth-of-gold, with a living, quivering sheen. All the horse's body was of this uniform, strange tint, but his mane and tail were a dull, tawny yellow deepening at the extremities into the hue of rusty gold. Though his hide was streaked with the sweat of his rebellion, and caked in places with the dust of the long road he had come, and welted by the whips of his tormentors, the color and the gloss shone out as undimmed as his proud spirit was undaunted by the hard knocks of his captivity.

The three men clearly were hard pressed. Their faces were coated thick with dust; their eyes were red-rimmed, bulging, and bloodshot; their movements were heavy with fatigue. Scarcely a sound escaped their lips as they watched for every fresh manœuver of their

prisoner, and fought doggedly to gain a yard or two along the road. In the silence and intensity of the struggle there was something savage, elemental, and incomparable, heightened by the extraordinary beauty of the animal and the uncouth appearance of the men. Between them, the captive and his captors, Marion's sympathy was about equally divided. At every gallant sally made by the horse her heart leaped, and she hoped instinctively that he would go free. But then, the next instant, she was thrilled by the bold and shrewd counter-play of the cow-punchers that blocked the horse's strategy.

Marion had scarcely comprehended all this, and imperfectly, when a terrifying thing occurred. The golden horse seemed to have paused and gathered all his forces for an effort that should make his best previous performance look like the silly antics of a colt. Suddenly, and without any warning manœuver, he charged the full length of his rope straight at the man who held it coiled in his hand, with the end looped around the horn of his saddle. At the final bound, he reared as if to fall upon the cowboy and mangle him with his forefeet. But instead of finishing this attack, he whirled on his hind legs with incredible swiftness; and before the man could gather up the slack of the rope, or brace himself for the shock, the wild horse dashed across the road with all the strength and fury there was in him.

Marion screamed, and closed her eyes. There were dreadful sounds of falling bodies, of bodies dragged on the ground, with grunts and groans and smothered cries. Then silence. When she dared to look she could see at first only a welter of men and horses half-hidden

by the dust. Near her lay the gold horse with his head twisted backward by the taut rope, which choked him until his eyes bulged, and foam dripped from his lips. The man who had held the lariat lay half under his fallen pony, whose efforts to rise were checked by the tightened rope still tied to the saddlebow. The two other men were on their feet, one clutching the straightened halter, the second deftly slipping a lariat around the prisoner's pawing hind legs.

It was all over in a minute. The taut rope was cut near the saddle of the fallen pony, which then scrambled to its feet; the leader rose, shook himself, and proceeded phlegmatically to adjust the turned saddle, and to climb stiffly into it; the leading-rope was passed to him again, the second lariat was loosed from the outlaw's feet, permitting him to rise; the other men remounted; and the procession moved on again in silence, scarcely a word having been spoken from the time the horse made his mad charge for liberty. And now he seemed to have had enough of the conflict, for he stepped forward obediently and, Marion fancied, as demurely as a child that has finished a naughty tantrum.

Then at last there was speech. One of the men had dropped back a few paces to be in the rear of the prisoner. He sat heavily in the saddle, leaning forward as if he would fall on the pony's neck. But his eyes never left the golden horse, and when he spoke it was not to the girl, who had ridden close up to his side, but to himself, in a kind of hoarse and guttural soliloquy.

"But he ain't done. He's foolin'," the man said again and again, as if he had started the words and could not stop them. "He ain't done. He's foolin'."

Marion looked at him curiously. He was the typical cow-puncher, in blue flannel shirt and leather chaps, with the inevitable revolver hanging loosely at his hip, and a long quirt suspended from his right wrist. The dust on his face was stained with blood that had flowed from a raw bruise on his temple, and Marion now noticed that his left arm hung limp at his side.

"You're hurt!" she said softly.

The man turned, and stared at her blankly, and she saw that his face was distorted into a set expression of pain.

"Arm busted," he said, after a moment, as if surprised by her question; and then renewed his watch.

"How did it happen?" she asked.

"Throwed me."

"You don't mean you tried to ride him!"

"Jerked me. Th' man ain't born't c'n ride 'im."

"You were leading him?"

"No, just thought I was," he said grimly. "He drug me."

"When was that?"

"This morning — about seven miles back."

"Where did he come from?"

"San Luis."

"Where is that, please?"

"Over yander," he answered, nodding toward the western mountains.

Marion stared.

"You haven't brought him over the mountains!"

"'Round by Pinto Pass, an' up through the canyon."

"I've never seen a horse like that before," she said, after a brief silence.

"Nor anybody else has," he replied, with a note of pride.

"But he's no cow pony — surely."

"You ain't never heard o' Sunnysides?"

"No."

He looked at her curiously.

"Of course not," he said apologetically. "You're f'm the city. East, maybe?"

"Yes, I'm from New York."

"Then it's natch'ral. Everybody in these parts has heard o' Sunnysides, though it's not many that's seen him."

"Please tell me about him."

The man's eyes brightened a little.

"He's got some strange blood in him," he began. "Nobody knows what it is, but th' ain't another one o' that color, nor his devil spirit, in the whole bunch. The rest of 'em's just ordinary wild horses runnin' up an' down the sandhills of the San Luis. There's people't say he's a ghost horse. Fact! An' they say't he'll never stay caught. I don't know. It's certain't he's been caught three times,— not countin' the times cow-punchers an' others has thought they'd caught him, but hadn't. The first time he was caught actual he broke out o' the strongest corral in the San Luis — at night — an' nobody sees hide nor hair of 'im — not so much as a flicker o' yellow in the moonlight. An' back he was, headin' the herd again.

"Nex' time Thad Brinker ropes him. Thad's the topnotch cow-puncher between the Black Hills an' the Rio Grande, an' he comes all the way f'm Dakoty when he hears the yarn about Sunnysides. Thad gits fourteen

men to help him round up the bunch, an' then he ropes the gold feller after a fight that's talked about yit in the San Luis. He ropes him. An' then what does Brinker do?"

He looked at Marion as if he dared her to make as many guesses as she wished. She shook her head.

"You ain't the only one that'd never hit it," he went on with satisfaction. "Thad ropes him, an' while they lay there restin', Sunnysides all tied up so he can't move, an' Brinker rubbin' some bumps he'd come by in the fracas, just then the red comes up onto Sangre de Cristo. Brinker sees it — Ever seen the sunset color on Sangre de Cristo? No? That's a pity, Miss. Indeed, that's a pity. But you're f'm Noo York, you said."

He paused again, and Marion began to realize the full degree of her provinciality and ignorance. She was from New York. What a pity!

"Well," said the cowboy, as if resolved to do the best he could in the circumstances, "sometimes — maybe three or four times a year — it's weird. It's religious. The white peaks turn red as blood — that's why they're called Sangre de Cristo. It's Spanish for Blood of Christ. It makes you feel queer-like"— He paused a moment thoughtfully, watching the golden horse as it stepped quietly, lightly, with head high, just ahead of them. "The red comes onto Sangre de Cristo, an' Brinker sees it. He looks at the blood on the peaks, an' then at the gold horse lyin' there all torn an' dirty, an' this is what Brinker does, an' maybe he couldn't help it. He ups an' cuts the ropes, an' Sunnysides 's off to his waitin' bunch, an' they all go snortin' down the valley."

There was a touch of awe in the man's voice, and Marion felt a little of it too. She looked toward the serrated barrier of mountains, in the very middle of which stood old Thunder under his pall of cloud. Beyond lay San Luis — Sangre de Cristo — and what romance! Would she ever — Her eyes rested for a moment on the black pile that now, as always, fascinated and yet disturbed her.

"And you?" she said at length, turning to the cowboy.

"There wasn't no red sunset this time," the m' . answered, with a grim smile. "But we ain't slep' since," he added, with a return of weariness.

"You caught him?" she asked admiringly.

"Us three."

"But what are you doing with him here?"

"He's sold, if we c'n find the man't offered a thousand for him a year ago."

"Who was he?"

But she knew already. Some swift flash of intuition told her there was but one man in Paradise Park who —

"His name's Haig, an' he's —"

"Philip Haig!" she murmured.

"You know him?"

"Yes — no. That is, I've heard of him."

It was on her lips,— the explanation that the men had passed the branch road leading to Haig's ranch, that they were now riding away from it. But she hesitated. And why? She did not know then; but an hour later she would be reproaching herself bitterly for that moment's indecision. The words were almost spoken, but something checked them; and before she could make

up her mind to follow her first natural impulse it was too late.

The leader of the party turned in his saddle, and called to the man at Marion's side, who rode quickly forward and joined his companions. There was a conversation inaudible to her ears, and while she still pondered over her inexplicable hesitation the cowboys and the golden horse, followed by Marion, approached the group of squat, unpainted houses that bore without apology the name of Paradise.

CHAPTER III

SETH HUNTINGTON'S OPPORTUNITY

IT was Thursday, the one day of the week when Paradise needed no apologist. For on Thursdays the stage arrived from Tellurium, bringing the mail and, now and then, a passenger, and always a whiff of the outside world. No resident of Paradise Park would willingly have missed the arrival of the stage; and on this occasion fully two-thirds of the male population, with nine-tenths of the female, had already assembled. But the stage was not due for an hour or more. The women bargained and gossiped in Thompson's store; the men, most of them, were gathered around a stiff game of freeze-out in the Square Deal Saloon; and only the score or more of saddle horses hitched in front of the store, and the dozen or so of buckboards and road wagons parked in the rear of it, showed that Paradise was in its weekly state of mild and patient expectancy.

So the three cow-punchers, the yellow horse, and Marion rode into Paradise without being seen or heard, and halted in front of the post-office.

"Hal-lo! Hallo!" sang out the leader of the cowboys. And then, with the petulance of one that is "all in": "Is this a dam' grave-yard?"

A thin man in his shirt sleeves, with a whisky glass in one hand and a towel in the other, came to the door of the Square Deal Saloon. His pallid face had the look

of settled weariness that is characteristic of keepers of such oases. Slavin had never, within the recollection of the oldest frequenter of his establishment, betrayed the slightest interest in anything. If there was a certain change in his expression as he looked out between narrowed eyelids into the garish sunlight it was one indicative of mild resentment at having been disturbed in his methodic occupation behind the bar. He saw with neither interest nor anticipation the three strangers, who ought to have had enough sense to dismount and walk in if they wanted anything.

"Well," he began in a drawling and sarcastic tone, "what —"

It probably would have been a cautious and covered insult to the presumed intelligence of the strangers, if he had finished the question. But it died away on his thin lips. His fishy, blue eyes had caught at last the gleam of Sunnysides, half in eclipse behind the dull-hued cow ponies. For a few seconds he stared, while his mouth stood open, and his features slowly responded to the first emotion he had felt in years.

"Hell's bobcats!" he yelled.

The glass slipped from his hand, and fell tinkling in pieces on the floor as he lunged out into the road.

In the saloon there was a moment of tense silence as the men there slowly realized that a phenomenon had occurred. Slavin was excited! The silence was followed by a hubbub of raised voices and a racket of overturned chairs and the scrape and thud of boots on the sanded floor. At that instant a woman in a pink calico dress, drawn by Slavin's yell, came to the door of Thompson's, and promptly screeched. The poker game

was never finished; Thompson's trade was ruined for the day; and the strange group in the roadway became the center of a jostling, uproarious crowd of men and women, who alternately bombarded the three cowpunchers with questions and stared at Sunnysides in silent wonder. But they were careful to maintain a respectful distance between themselves and the formidable captive, though he stood motionless amid all the uproar, like a golden statue of a horse, with his head raised proudly, his yellow-black eyes flashing defiance and suspicion, and his lustrous hide gleaming in the sun.

Marion's enjoyment of this exciting scene was tinged with a vague uneasiness. She had watched the men come tumbling out of the Square Deal Saloon and the women swarming from Thompson's store, and had felt a curious relief at seeing neither Seth nor Claire among them. Though she could not have given any reason for her satisfaction, their absence, and Seth's especially, seemed to her a piece of rare good fortune. Haig's warning —"Tell him he's a fool to anger me!"— was still echoing at the back of her brain; her recent act of incomprehensible errancy still troubled and perplexed her; and try as she would, she was unable to suppress the feeling that she had become inextricably entangled in the feud between Haig and Huntington. She was not yet ready to face Huntington. Thank Heaven, he was not there!

But at the very instant of her self-congratulation, and when she was just turning her attention again to the hubbub around the golden outlaw, her eye was suddenly caught, across the heads of the crowd, by a figure that caused her to stiffen in the saddle.

"Seth!" she gasped.

He came striding rapidly from the direction of the blacksmith's, the most distant of the group of buildings, — a large and heavy but well-built man, whose black, short-cropped beard and bushy, overhanging eyebrows gave him a somewhat truculent expression, which was heightened by his rough and domineering demeanor. He was better dressed, or more carefully at least, than any of the other men. He wore a coat and trousers of dark-brown corduroy, a light-gray flannel shirt with a flowing black tie, and a wide-brimmed Stetson hat. His belt, under the unbuttoned coat, was of elaborately stamped leather, with a pocket at one side from which a heavy, gold watch chain was looped to a silver ring, and with an ornate holster at the other where the black butt of a revolver was visible as he moved.

He shouldered his way through the crowd in the heedless manner of most bulky men, who seldom realize how much space they take that properly belongs to others. At six feet from the golden horse he halted, and surveyed him with shining eyes.

"Sunnysides, eh?" he said, turning toward the nearest of the strangers.

"The's only one," replied the cow-puncher.

"Who caught him this time?"

"Us three. That's Jim Raley, with the busted arm. That other is Jud Smith, My name's Larkin. We belong to the X bar O outfit on Lost Soldier Creek."

"Second outfit below Forty-Mile," said Huntington familiarly.

"Right!"

"Sanders still foreman?"

"Yes."

"Then what are you doing with that horse up here?"

The cow-puncher grinned.

"I ketch your meanin'," he replied. "It's like this. Sanders chased Sunnysides three seasons, an' thought he'd roped him. But all he gits 's a cracked leg, an' not a yeller hair of the slippery beast. Then us three takes on the job — not presumin' to be better'n Sanders, but hopin' for luck. It comes our way, an' there you are. We offer him to Sanders — for a price, natch'rally — but he says he don't believe in ghosts, an' we c'n go to hell with him."

"You must have missed the road. This is Paradise," said Huntington.

The crowd roared its appreciation.

"The' ain't much in names," observed Larkin testily.

The crowd laughed again, though, of course, less heartily.

"Well, Heaven or Hell," said Huntington, "is the horse for sale?"

"He is — if he ain't sold already."

"How's that?"

"We're offered a price for him — if it still holds good. That's why we've come to Paradise — an' no other reason, believe me!"

"How much?"

"Thousand."

There was a stir in the crowd.

"That's some price for a bronco," said Huntington, with an assumed indifference.

"It sure is — if you're talkin' about a *bronco*," retorted the cow-puncher.

There was a brief silence, in which all eyes were turned again upon the golden horse, standing motionless but alert, as if keenly alive to all that passed. The common ponies around him stamped, and champed their bits, and moved restlessly in their places, but Sunnysides remained calm and observant, with all the dignity and contempt of a captive patrician in a crowd of yokels.

Marion saw admiration and desire growing in Seth's eyes, and knew that her foreboding had not been without reason.

"And who's paying a thousand dollars for him?" asked Huntington.

"Haig's his name, Philip Haig," answered Larkin. "Know him?"

If Larkin had been a little nettled by the levity of the Paradisians he now had his revenge, though much to his surprise, in the extraordinary effect produced by his simple announcement. The smiles faded from the faces assembled around him; significant glances were exchanged; and there followed a silence so deep that the murmur of the Brightwater could be heard quite clearly across the meadows. Then there was a rustling movement in the crowd, and every face, as if by a common impulse, or at a given signal, was turned toward Huntington.

Marion was not sure of the feelings of the others, but there could be no mistake in what she read in Huntington's black countenance. She was not only frightened, but surprised and pained. For all his coarseness and crudity, she had until to-day believed him to be innately gentle, with only a rough and ungracious exterior. She had seen him always tender with Claire, whom undoubt-

edly he loved with all the best there was in him. But now she perceived the other side of his character, which she had indeed divined at first, but which she had firmly, on account of Claire, refused to acknowledge. An unworthy passion g! :d in his eyes; his features were distorted by an expression of mingled cunning and hate; and his head somehow seemed to sink lower between his shoulders as he leaned slightly forward, studying the face of the cow-puncher. Then swiftly he took himself in hand, and masked his passions under an air of careless badinage that was, for the moment, suited to his purpose.

"But I don't just understand," he drawled insinuatingly. "Haig hasn't been away from the Park lately — unless he's gone an' come by night."

A snicker or two, and one loud guffaw rewarded him for this insult to his absent foe. But Marion felt the color rising to her cheeks.

"It's a year ago he's seen him, 'way off, shinin' in the sun," explained Larkin. "He stops at the X bar O, an' says he'll give a thousand for him."

"So that's all you've got to go on, is it?" sneered Huntington.

"Yes," answered Larkin uneasily

"An' you think he'll make good, do you?"

"If a man's word ain't good he don't stay in this country long, does he?"

"That's right — he won't stay long!" replied Huntington, with a savage laugh.

"You mean to say —" queried Larkin pointedly, leaning across the neck of his pony, and looking keenly into Huntington's eyes.

"Nothing," answered Huntington, lifting his huge shoulders.

"That's sayin' a lot an' sayin' nothing," retorted Larkin.

"You'll know more when you try to collect that thousand."

"All right," responded Larkin, gathering up the reins as if to terminate the interview. "Where's his place — if it ain't a secret?"

"It's over beyond that ridge," said Huntington, pointing toward the west. "You go back about three miles the way you came, an' there's a branch road —"

"Hell!" snorted the cowboy whose arm hung limp at his side.

The three men exchanged glances. They were very weary; they had used almost the last of their powers to bring the outlaw this far; and they were plainly reluctant to undertake another tussle with the tireless animal, now ready, without doubt, to renew his struggle for liberty.

Huntington watched them narrowly.

"I'm all in!" grumbled Raley.

"You look it," said Huntington. Then he added lightly: "Still, you ought to fetch up at Haig's place before morning."

Marion felt disgust and resentment rising in her at this misrepresentation of the distance to Haig's ranch. Whatever Haig had done, this was cowardly and unfair. She looked eagerly at the other men, expecting to hear some one correct the gross exaggeration. But the faces were all blank, and no one spoke.

Something like a groan escaped from the lips of the injured cowboy. He looked as if he might tumble from the saddle at any instant.

"Sure we can!" said Larkin doggedly. "Come, men! Let's move on."

"Well, good luck!" said Huntington carelessly. And then, as if on second thought: "But see here! You fellows look all right to me, and if Haig's changed his mind, or hasn't got the cash handy, bring the horse back here, and I'll talk business with you."

"Talk business now!" Smith blurted out, averting his eyes from Larkin.

"Very well. I'll give you five hundred for him — if you don't want to go any farther. He ain't worth it, but he's a kind of a curiosity, and —"

"That ain't talkin' business worth a dam'!" cried Larkin. "Come along, men!"

He turned his pony's head, and took a fresh grip on the halter that held the prisoner. Smith moved also, though slowly, but Raley did not budge.

"I'm damned if I go any further!" he growled.

Smith stopped, and looked uncertainly from Raley to Larkin, from Larkin to Huntington, who was studying him craftily.

"The five hundred isn't wind," said Huntington sneeringly. "It's over there in Thompson's safe, if you want it."

"We'll see Haig first," said Larkin, compressing his lips, and speaking more to his companions than to Huntington.

Smith shifted uneasily in his saddle, while Raley avoided Larkin's eyes, and looked appealingly at Hunt-

ington. The ranchman, in his turn, took a sidelong glance, furtive and questioning, at the faces of his neighbors. The moment was critical, and much more was involved in the crisis than the possession of the golden outlaw. For a long time Huntington had assumed a certain leadership in the Park, but it had not always been unquestioned. His qualifications for leadership were not as apparent to all his neighbors as they were to himself, and there were some who even resented his pretensions. Nevertheless he had, in a way, succeeded; and he had been permitted to represent the entire valley as far as he liked in the war with Philip Haig. One and all, indeed, regarded Haig as an intruder; many of them had more than once threatened violence against him; and there was not among them one whom Haig, if he had wanted a defender, could have counted on. Yet, for all that, Huntington was practically alone in the depth of his hatred and the violence of his methods. If Haig had no friends in the Park, he had only a few, perhaps no more than two or three, inveterate enemies, of whom Huntington was the active representative.

Huntington now saw in the faces of the men around him that they were doubtful of him, and that the time was opportune to turn their passivity into energetic support of his plans. Moreover, he had already "put his foot in it," had gone too far to withdraw without discredit. Having openly insulted the absent enemy, and having clearly revealed his intention to cheat him of this prize, to weaken now would be to abandon forever all hope of ascendency. For an instant he regretted what he had done, and cursed himself under his breath.

Then, taking a new grip on himself, he returned to the attack.

"Seven hundred and fifty, then!" he said with a swagger. "And it's cash, not words."

There was a moment of suspense. The three men, who were moving slowly away, turned in their saddles. Not a muscle quivered, not a foot stirred in the expectant crowd. Marion felt that in another minute she would cry out, shrieking at Seth, shrieking the warning Haig had sent by her.

"That's good enough for me!" declared Raley, throwing the reins over his pony's head, and preparing painfully to dismount.

"No, Jim!" cried Smith. "Let him say a thousand, an' I'm with you. 'Tain't exactly on the square, but the's no use killin' ourselves for —"

His speech was cut short by a shrill cry from a woman who stood on a horse block at the outer edge of the crowd.

"Look! Look!" she called, pointing a finger toward the long white road.

CHAPTER IV

THE HIGHEST BIDDER

FAR up the road appeared a little cloud of dust with a black speck in its center.

A murmur ran through the crowd; a name was passed from mouth to mouth; and the men nearest Huntington began to edge away instinctively, leaving a larger and larger space clear around him and the three cow-punchers.

Marion too looked, and understood. She had not dismounted, but still sat her pony within ten feet of the outlaw, at the side of the roadway, in about the middle of which stood Huntington. With an effort she drew her eyes away from that ominous black spot in the distance, and turned toward Seth. A shiver ran through her body, but her cheeks burned, and there was a voice in her ears that shouted, "Tell him he's a fool to anger me!" For a moment she was on the point of rushing upon Seth, and shrieking that warning into his face. But now it was too late.

Like all the others Huntington stood for a few seconds fascinated by that figure in the puff of dust. And for just those few seconds there was a certain unsteadiness in his attitude, irresolution in the black eyes beneath their bushy brows. But the blue-whiteness under the dark beard was not the pallor of fear, so called. Seth

Huntington was as incapable of physical cowardice as he was of moral courage. He was not afraid of Philip Haig, but he was dreadfully afraid of being thought afraid of him. There was yet time to avoid a clash with Haig, to withdraw from an undertaking in which he knew he was wholly in the wrong. But he was not equal to that test of character. He would sooner tackle all the Haigs in Christendom than face the derision of his neighbors, whom he had assiduously taught to expect great things of him on the first occasion. Here was the occasion; he had seized it, blinded by passion; and there was no way for him now but to see it through. He straightened up, and faced the three cowpunchers.

"All right!" he cried defiantly. "It's a thousand."

But the three had heard the name murmured by the crowd, had seen the distant horseman. Larkin was plainly elated. Raley and Smith, as plainly abashed, looked this way and that, avoiding the eyes of their leader, and every other eye as well. Huntington, seeing the game about to slip from his hands, whirled on his heel and looked swiftly toward the store.

"Thompson!" he yelled.

"Here!" was the answer, as a small, gray-bearded man in shirt sleeves advanced a step or two from the door.

"Fetch me that roll from your safe, will you?"

"Right!"

As Thompson disappeared within the store, Huntington turned again toward the cowboys.

"A thousand dollars — cash!" he repeated.

Larkin leaned forward on his horse, and looked at him shrewdly.

"Seems to me it's not the horse you're after so much as him," he said, with a grin and a nod toward the road.

"That's as may be," retorted Huntington. "Money talks."

"An' it says mighty funny things sometimes," replied Larkin, who now made no concealment of his dislike of Huntington and his "game."

"We'll see!" cried Huntington angrily. "How does twelve hundred sound to you two?"

He looked steadily at Raley and Smith, who exchanged glances.

"What's your awful hurry?" Larkin demanded, in a drawling tone, but with an anxious eye for the galloping figure now in plain view. "We'll give Haig a chance to bid — eh, men?"

Smith shot an angry but uneasy look at the leader. Huntington saw it, and guessed that there was more than weariness and greed in the willingness of Smith and Raley to combine against Larkin. Probably, he thought, there had been differences of opinion, disputes even, on the road to Paradise. He turned impatiently toward the store.

At that instant Thompson ran out, broke through the ring of men, and handed a roll of "yellowbacks" to Huntington, who hurriedly peeled off several of the bills, and thrust them at arm's length toward the wavering cow-punchers.

"Haig talked about a thousand dollars!" he cried. "There's fifteen hundred. Do you want it?"

For a moment it was heads or tails. Even Larkin eyed the money hungrily. Then his teeth clicked

together, and he turned upon his partners, whose faces showed plainly the answer that was upon their lips.

"An' what'll you say to *him?*" he demanded.

"Eighteen hundred!" shouted Huntington.

"That's good enough for me!" cried Raley. "Say it, Jud!"

There was a distant thunder of hoofs as Haig's horse took the short bridge over the Brightwater. The crowd backed still farther away from Huntington, who was again fingering his roll of bills.

"Two thousand!" he roared, shaking the handful of "yellowbacks" at the wavering Smith.

Raley leaned from his saddle, and grabbed Smith's arm.

"Quick, Jud!" he pleaded hotly. "Don't be a fool!"

"All right! We'll take it!" answered Smith.

"No!" said Larkin firmly, pulling his horse around between Huntington and the two partners.

"Yes!" the two cried out together.

Huntington stepped forward, and thrust both handfuls of bills almost into Larkin's face.

"Name your price then!" he bellowed.

Larkin looked at the money,— smelt it,— as he said afterwards, grimly confessing his weakness at the sight of more than he could save in years of riding the range and branding mavericks. If there had been ten seconds more —

Haig galloped into the crowd, which gave him plenty of room, and reined up his pony just in front of the golden outlaw. For some instants he saw only the

horse; and his eyes kindled. Then he faced the cowboys and Huntington.

They were fixed in almost the very attitudes in which he had come upon them. Huntington's outstretched hands had indeed fallen to his side, but they still clutched the crumpled bills. Raley's blood-stained face was purple with anger and chagrin, while Smith's wore a sullen, hangdog look. As for Larkin, he met Haig's questioning scrutiny with a look of mingled triumph and guilt.

"Well, why don't you go on?" asked Haig, with a smile.

There was no response. The silence was again so complete that the music of the Brightwater was heard across the meadows.

Haig slowly swept the crowd with an inquiring glance. All these men were hostile toward him, of course; but how far would they support Huntington? No matter! He swung himself suddenly out of the saddle, and addressed himself to the leader of the cowboys.

"You're Larkin, aren't you?" he said.

"Yes," answered the embarrassed cow-puncher.

"And the others are Smith and —"

"Raley," prompted Larkin.

"And here, of course, is my good friend Huntington, looking like Fortune with both hands full."

Several men in the crowd laughed, whereupon Huntington, who had evidently forgotten the money, made matters worse for himself by hastily and clumsily thrusting it into the pockets of his coat, while his face flushed angrily.

"That's right, Cousin Seth," Haig said lightly. "You may need it."

Marion, at these words, quivered with alarm. Was he going to tell Huntington, there in that crowd, of the incident in the pasture? His next speech, however, reassured her.

"Now, Larkin," he said, "let's understand things. That's my horse, isn't it?"

"That's what I've been sayin' some time back," answered Larkin, in a tone of relief.

"And you, Smith?"

"I suppose so," was the sullen reply.

"And Raley?"

"No, it ain't!" answered that one with a sudden flare-up of courage.

"Then whose horse is it?"

"It belongs to Larkin an' Smith an' me."

"Of course. But why did you bring him to Paradise Park?"

"To sell him."

"To whom, please?"

Raley, caught in the trap, looked appealingly toward Smith, but got no help from him.

"To whom?" repeated Haig sharply.

"To you — if you wanted him!" Raley blurted out at last.

"If I wanted him!" retorted Haig ironically. "I bargained for him with you, didn't I?"

"Yes," growled Raley.

"And you went and caught him *for me?*"

"Yes."

"And you brought him to Paradise Park *for me?*"

"Yes."

"Very well. Don't be downhearted!" he said cheerfully. "A good name is more to be desired than great riches. Isn't that so, Cousin Seth?"

The ranchman's face flamed.

"If you've got anything to say to me, say it quick!" he jerked out.

"I have several things to say to you, one at a time," replied Haig smoothly. "To begin with, these men told you the horse was mine, didn't they?"

"No, they didn't. They said you'd offered a thousand dollars for him."

Haig laughed.

"All right, if that suits you better! They told you they had brought him here to deliver him to me for a thousand dollars, and you thought it would be a fine joke to buy him yourself. Is that it?"

Huntington did not respond to this, but watched Haig narrowly, a little puzzled by his manner.

"How much did he offer you?" Haig asked Larkin.

"Two thousand dollars — and then he said name our price."

Haig whistled.

"Well, I'm damned if you haven't got some sporting blood in you!" he said, smiling at Huntington. "How much was in your roll?"

Huntington's first impulse was to tell Haig that it was none of his business. But he was deceived by Haig's manner, having expected his enemy to fall upon him like a thunderbolt. His surprise was shared, indeed, by most of the men, who had expected gun-play on the jump. Only Marion, sitting still and watchful

on her pony, was not misled. She felt that Haig was playing with Huntington, and biding his time.

Huntington's vanity completed his self-delusion.

"Four thousand, two hundred dollars!" he replied boastfully, glancing around at his neighbors.

"Whew!" uttered Haig, between pursed lips. Then to Larkin: "You were hard pressed, weren't you? But never mind, boys, I'll do better than I promised — and charge it up to Cousin Seth."

Another laugh flickered around the crowd. It was evident that there was no great objection to seeing Huntington baited.

"My name's Huntington!" he snorted. "What's this damned cousin business, anyhow?"

Haig raised his eyebrows.

"Does it annoy you?" he asked, in a tone of exaggerated politeness.

Huntington merely glared. He was one of those self-made wits who enjoy their own jokes immensely but grumble at plucking barbed shafts out of their own skins. He began to wish for the thunderbolt.

"But it's your own fault, you know," Haig added.

"What in hell are you talking about?" Huntington growled.

"I'm talking about your last visit to my ranch."

"My last — What do you mean, damn you!" the ranchman thundered, his right hand moving to his belt.

There was a hurried movement among those of the crowd who, absorbed in the dialogue, had half-consciously crept nearer. But Haig appeared to have noticed neither Huntington's motion nor the backing-away of the spectators.

"And wouldn't it have been reckless extravagance to pay good money for Sunnysides when you might just have come and taken him out of my corrals?"

For a few seconds Huntington, as if he could scarce believe that he heard aright, was speechless with amazement and rage.

"Say it, damn you!" he said chokingly. "What do you mean?"

"Don't get so excited, or you may break a blood-vessel, Cous — I beg your pardon, *Mister* Huntington."

"Say it!" roared the ranchman.

Then Haig dropped his mask.

"I will say it," he began in a voice that rang ominously. "I'll say it so that even you cannot fail to understand me. I mean that I'm tired of your threats and persecutions. I mean that you have harassed me and my men at every opportunity. I mean that you drove that bunch of my cattle off the cliff last September. I mean that within twenty-four hours another fence has been cut, and that you know who did it. I mean that your attempt to buy my horse was only another of the contemptible and cowardly tricks you have played on me. I mean, Huntington, that you are a bully, a liar and a thief!"

Huntington's hand had slipped to the butt of his revolver at the beginning of this intolerable speech; but he had waited, as if fascinated, as if unable to move under the torrent of denunciation. Then to the onlookers it appeared that the bold young man, who had not yet made the slightest motion toward his own weapon, would be slain in his tracks. But Haig was

as much the quicker in action as he was the nimbler in wit.

The two revolvers cracked, it seemed, as one, but with very different results. Haig's battered old hat, lifted as if by a sudden gust of wind, slid from his head, and fell to the ground with a bullet hole through it. But Huntington threw up his hands, pitched forward, and fell in a heap in the dusty road.

There was a single shrill, short-cut shriek as a woman near the door of the post-office slipped down in a faint; and then a chorus of quavering cries as other women clutched the arms of the men nearest them.

Marion swayed in her saddle, her head drooping on her breast. A young cowboy darted from the crowd, and grabbed her as she fell. He started to lift and carry her away, but, with a desperate effort, she recovered, and stood erect, trying to thrust him from her. He held her nevertheless, supporting her with an arm under one of hers.

Haig had quickly turned and faced the group of men at the left of the road.

"Is there anybody else here that wants to buy my horse?" he demanded coolly.

There was no response, no movement. He whirled, and confronted the silent row of men on the other side.

"Is there anybody else here who thinks he can drive me out of Paradise Park?"

Still no one replied; and Haig, with a shrug, thrust his revolver back in its holster.

"Thompson!" he called out.

"Here!" was the answer, in the same tone of readi-

ness with which he had responded to Huntington. By keeping his mouth shut, and never taking sides in any of the occasional disagreements and disputes that enlivened the tedium of life in that community, Thompson had established a reputation for neutrality and trustworthiness, and was permitted to be everybody's friend.

"Look after Huntington, please!" said Haig. "He's not badly hit — you'll find the bullet under the left shoulder blade. It'll do him good."

Thompson and some others lifted Huntington, and carried him into the store; and at that moment the stage, its approach unnoticed, rattled up, and stopped with shrieking brakes and creaking harness. There was a sudden outbreak of speech on all sides, as if the tension had been relaxed by the recurrence of a familiar and orderly event. In the confusion Haig turned toward Sunnysides and the three cow-punchers.

"Now, Larkin," he began briskly, "we'll finish this business, and then —"

He stopped short, and stared.

By the side of the golden horse stood Marion. Still shocked and bewildered, yet strangely thrilled, she had stretched out one trembling arm, and rested her hand on the neck of the wild creature, from which every other person in the crowd around — and she too in her right senses — had kept away, in full appreciation of his reputation. Whether it was that the outlaw had for the time given up all notion of resistance and hostility, or that he felt the difference between the girl's gentle touch and the rough handling he had undergone, he did not stir. But this docility, this under-

standing, was only a part of the sight that brought Haig to a standstill.

He had left many things behind him, but there was one thing he had not been able to destroy as he would have destroyed it, root and branch and flower. He would always have a weakness — he called it that — for beauty in whatever form it appeared to him. Sunsets and twilights, the shadows of trees in still waters, flowers and reeds, old ruins in the moonlight, sometimes even faces moved him until he was ashamed, and berated himself for a sentimental weakling. And now —

The girl was tawny as a leopard. Her hair was almost exactly the color of the outlaw's dull yellow mane, but finer, of course, and softer; and her complexion — he wondered that he had not noticed it before — had a peculiar richness and brilliancy that seemed to reflect the luster of Sunnysides' golden hide. They stood there entrancing his artist-eye with their perfect harmony of line and color; and the last thin rays of the setting sun bathed horse and girl in a golden light — an atmosphere in which they glowed like one of Titian's mellowed canvases.

"Don't move, please!" he exclaimed.

But Marion did not hear, or did not heed. She dropped her hand, and glided toward him, while he watched her, curious and rapt. Perhaps it was because he saw her through that golden glow, perhaps because his nerves were a little unsteady in the reaction from the strain they had undergone, that she made a singular appeal to his imagination. He fancied that for all the fineness of her figure, the exquisite poise of

her small head, the cameo-like delicacy of her face, there was something in her as wild, untamed, and elemental as the heart of Sunnysides.

Thus she moved slowly past him, and passing gave him a long and steady look, with an unfathomable expression in her eyes,— an expression neither of anger nor of bitterness nor of disgust nor of anything he might have expected after all he had done that day. He turned, and watched her until she had disappeared in the crowd around the stagecoach; and with her went out the last rays of the sun.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Philip Haig.

With a shake of his shoulders, as if to throw off some unwelcome weight upon them, he turned again to take up his business with the gaping cow-punchers.

CHAPTER V

"HE SHALL TELL ME!"

DOCTOR WILSON, arriving from Tellurium on the third day after the encounter at Paradise, found Huntington in a bad way, due not so much to the wound in his left shoulder as to the state of his mind. Haig's bullet was extracted without difficulty or serious complications, but Haig's words were encysted too deep for any probe. Huntington's self-love had been dealt a mortal blow; and somebody must pay for it.

First of all it was Claire that paid; then Marion. He did not mean to be disagreeable to them, but never having cultivated self-restraint he had none of it now to ease the days of his convalescence. He filled the house with his clamor, and required as much attention as an ailing child. There were just two ways to keep him quiet. Claire soothed him when she sat at his bedside, with one of his huge "paws" held in her tiny hands; and Marion found, somewhat to her surprise, that Seth liked music. The piano was one of the wonders of the Huntington house, for pianos are not essential instruments in the equipment of cattle ranches, and this was the only one in all that region of cattledom.

In music Seth's tastes were sentimental. "Lost

Chords" and "Rosaries" subdued him almost to tears; and if Marion only brought him tuneful violets every morn he tried his best to be good. So when Claire was not on duty at the bedside Marion must needs be on duty at the piano,— an ordeal that Claire endured, of course, more patiently than Marion.

Claire was almost comically unfit to be a ranchman's wife, and she too had been a trial on occasions. She was small and delicate, but vivacious, amiable, bright. Her blue eyes always had a childlike wonder in them, and she was fond of wearing her fluffy, golden hair in a girlish knot low on her neck, or even in a long, thick braid down her back, with a blue ribbon bow at the end. She flitted about the house like a butterfly, and yet she had managed somehow to make her home the marvel of Paradise Park.

To begin with it was the ordinary, one-story, rambling house of pine, with spruce-clad hills rising behind it, and a little stream rollicking down between it and the corrals. But a wide veranda had been constructed on three sides of it, furnished with wicker chairs, and half-screened with boxes of growing flowers. All around the house flowers grew,— old-fashioned garden flowers, roses and geraniums; beds of them everywhere, and blossoming shrubs along the stream.

The house contained, besides the kitchen and the bedrooms, just one big room. This, with its low ceiling, unpainted timbers, and small windows, was not unlike the hall of some old manor house. The floor was covered with Navajo rugs in rich and barbaric colors; the walls were draped with burlap in dull red dyes; and the windows were curtained with chintz in bright

yellows and reds. Above the windows and doors hung many heads of deer and elk and mountain sheep, and rifles on racks of horn. Between the two front windows stood the upright piano, and near it a small bookcase filled with novels and volumes of poetry. The big oak table at mealtime was made to look very inviting with white napery and modest china and silver, and a bouquet always in its center. At other times it was a library table, heaped with books and magazines, and in the evening, when the kerosene lamps were lighted, and the piñon was blazing in the great fireplace, the room seemed as remote from Paradise Park as Claire herself.

There was an occasional visitor at Huntington's in the period of his convalescence, usually a ranchwife eager for another glimpse at Claire's wonderful housekeeping, or a young cow-puncher drawn by the attraction of two very pretty and unusual women in one house. But the ranchmen themselves, with two or three exceptions, were content to be solicitous at long range — an abstention that relieved and at the same time troubled Huntington. He was not eager to talk with his neighbors about that episode at the post-office, but their aloofness filled him with uneasiness. Well, let them wait! They would hear from him again, and so should Haig!

There was, among the visitors, one whose coming perceptibly lightened the tedium of those days. Marion had the good fortune to see him in time not to be taken by surprise. Seated on the veranda after an exhausting recital for the benefit of Huntington, she perceived the figure of a horseman — yes, it was a horseman — rid-

ing out of the pines toward the corrals. She stared. He was so little and so lost between his pony, which seemed extraordinarily big, and his sombrero, which undoubtedly was enormous, that she remained for a moment dumb, and then, choking with laughter, fled into the house.

"Look, Claire, look!" she cried, grabbing her cousin's arm.

Claire, dragged to the door, looked and giggled.

"Haven't you seen that before?" she asked.

"No! Never!" answered Marion, her hand upon her mouth.

"Of course. He's just arrived — for the season. He was here last year, and the year before."

"And they let him?" demanded Marion, thinking of the irrepressible cow-punchers.

"Oh, he's all right!" Claire assured her. "That is, after you get used to him. The men had all sorts of fun with him the first summer he was here. But he took all their fun good-naturedly, and showed them he had pluck too. They began to like him. Everybody likes him, and so will you."

"But in the name of — who is he?"

The little man had descended like a parachute from his pony, and was now bobbing rapidly up the graveled walk.

"Smythe," explained Claire hurriedly. "But he's here now — I'll let him tell you — he likes to talk."

At the foot of the steps he caught sight of the two women in the doorway; removed his wonderful headgear with an eighteenth-century gesture; ducked his

head in a twentieth-century bow; and smiled. Claire stepped quickly out on the veranda.

"Oh, Mr. Smythe!" she cried gaily. "I'm so glad to see you. Come in!"

He was an undersized young man, immaculately dressed in brown tweeds and shining boots, a very high white collar and a sky-blue tie. The sombrero swinging in his hand was quite new, ornamented with a broad band of stamped leather, and it had the widest brim obtainable at the shop in Denver where a specialty is made of equipping the tenderfoot for life in the cattle country.

Smythe took Claire's proffered hand, and bent over it as if he had thought of kissing it, but lacked the courage of his gallantry. Claire introduced him to Marion, answered his questions about Seth, and then fluttered away to the kitchen, where she had an angel cake in the oven not to be entrusted to the cook.

"I arrived only yesterday, Miss Gaylord," Smythe chirped. "But I've heard of you already."

"I don't know whether to thank you or not," answered Marion.

"Oh, if you please! What I heard made me very solicitous about Huntington's health."

He smiled knowingly at her, and Marion loosed some of her pent-up laughter. Truly, Smythe was going to be a treat! She studied him stealthily while he chattered on. He wore a pointed beard of reddish hue; his head was quite bald on top, and bulging at the brow; and the contour of that head, with its polished dome, and the narrow face tapering down to the pointed beard, was comically suggestive of a carrot. But it was an intelligent, even intellectual countenance, and his blue

eyes were honest and bright. He might be laughed at, but he could not be flouted, she thought.

"Then you've been here before, Mr. ——" she began, and hesitated.

"Smythe," he prompted her generously. "J. Hamerton Smythe. S-m-y-t-h-e. I didn't change it from Smith, and I don't know what one of my esteemed ancestors did. But I'm glad he did. It gives me a touch of artificiality, don't you think? I fear being too natural."

Marion laughed, and that pleased him. She led the way to chairs near an open window where a black and yellow butterfly hovered over a honeysuckle blossom that had nodded its friendly way into the room.

"I'm from New York too," Smythe rattled on. "Columbia. Doing a little tutoring and a little post-graduate work. This is my third summer in the Park. Found it by chance. Wanted to go somewhere, and was tired of the old places — Maine and Adirondacks and the rest. Looked at a map in a railroad office, and there it was, sticking right out at me, the first name I lighted on. In small type too — curious, wasn't it? Clerks in office hadn't heard of it, but I started out to find it. Thought I'd better get to Paradise when I could. And now I'm glad. I feel like an old settler, and I believe the cow-punchers have ceased to regard me as a tenderfoot. That's as flattering as a Ph.D."

"I'm afraid they laugh at me," said Marion.

"On the contrary. Believe me, these cowboys have taken to reading poetry since you came."

"Please be natural, Mr. Smythe!"

"Fact! I'd hardly got my things unpacked before

one of them was riding over to ask me if I had a book about Lady Clara V[illegible]le Vere. It seems he'd heard the poem recited somewhere. I asked him why he wanted it, but he looked so flustered that I let him off. Didn't have a Tennyson with me, unfortunately, but I gave him my Byron, and I think that will hold him for a while."

"Charming!" exclaimed Marion. "But what has all that to do with me?"

"He's the chap that grabbed you in his arms when you were falling from your horse after that little business at Thompson's the other day."

Marion blushed, and then laughed.

"But how did you come to hear about that?" she demanded.

He chuckled.

"Oh, I hear everything!" he replied. "My friends say I've a nose for news."

"Well, I shall be very careful what I say to you."

"Please, no!" he protested. "I'm a safety vault when it comes to secrets."

She glanced quickly toward the door of Seth's bedroom, then toward the kitchen, before she spoke.

"So you've heard all about that day at the post-office?" she said in a low voice.

"Yes."

"Terrible!"

"But not unexpected."

"Why not unexpected?"

"Well," he replied, lowering his voice, and leaning nearer to Marion, "I'm afraid Huntington was looking for it."

"You mean — he deserved it?"

"I won't say that. You see — I'm neutral, like Thompson. I like Huntington, and I like Haig. I look at this fight without prejudice, even though I've a reason to be prejudiced."

"In favor of —?"

"Huntington."

"Why, please?"

"Huntington accepts my friendship, after a fashion."

"But — the other?"

"Nothing doing!"

Marion stared at him, wondering.

"Fact!" he assured her, with a sheepish smile.

"But why?"

"Don't know. I'd like to, but he lives like a hermit. Latchstring never hangs outside his door."

There was a certain evidence of feeling in Smythe's speech.

"You speak as if you —"

"As if I knew!" He took the words out of her mouth. "I do."

"How do you know?"

"I tried it."

"And then?"

"Kicked out!" he replied with a grimace.

Marion laughed in spite of her burning eagerness to hear more.

"Not exactly kicked," Smythe explained. "But I'd rather have been. He was as polite as — he's a gentleman, you see, so he knew how to do it without using his hands or his feet."

"But why?" insisted Marion.

"Why did I try? Curiosity. Simple, elemental, irresponsible curiosity."

She laughed again at his frank confession.

"No, I mean why did he kick you out, as you call it?"

"That's what I want to know. And I will know, too. I tell you, Miss Gaylord, I admire the man immensely. His secretiveness only makes me like him the more, probably because I myself am so garrulous. Most persons, though, cannot tolerate a man who minds his own business. Those who have no reason to hate Haig dislike him because he does not ask them to like him. His affairs are his own. Did you notice that scar?"

"Yes," answered Marion, scarcely above a whisper.

"Well, you can build any sort of romance you like around that. He has had his romance or tragedy or something, you may be sure. But he's no ordinary man, whatever he may be doing in Paradise Park. I have heard that he's surrounded with books and pictures in his cottage. He's got a Chinaman for a valet, and an Indian for his man Friday, and their mouths are as tight as his. What's more, he must be all right in the main things, for his foreman and cowboys stick to him through thick and thin, and say nothing. I tell you, Miss Gaylord, I'd like to be a friend of his, if only he gave a —"

"A damn, I believe they say," she prompted demurely.

"By Jove!" he said with enthusiasm. "You are a —"

She held up a warning finger.

"We're going to be friends, you know," she said.

"And friends understand each other — without words."

"Done!" he agreed, reaching for her hand, and shaking it.

"But this mystery," she said. "Doesn't anybody know —"

"You know as much as all of us. Of course," he added banteringly, "there's no denying a woman, when she starts. He might tell you!"

The speech startled her, and she blushed.

"Now, that's sheer impudence!" she retorted.

But he continued to look at her with a curious expression. How much had he guessed? In her confusion an impulse seized her. She leaned suddenly toward him, with flushed face and sparkling eyes.

"You dare me?" she demanded, her voice quivering.

"I dare you!" he answered gleefully.

"Well then, he shall tell me!"

"Good!" he exclaimed. "And I'll be around to take the kicks if he —"

"Oh, Cousin Seth!" cried Marion, leaping to her feet.

The bedroom door had opened, and Huntington came out, dressed in his familiar corduroy suit, but with his left arm still bandaged to his side., Smythe hastened forward to greet him.

CHAPTER VI

THE STORY OF THE SCAR

SHE was awakened by the shrill chatter of the magpies in the tall pine near her window. Often she had resented their quarrelsome dialog at dawn, but now she slipped eagerly out of bed, and hurried to the window. There had been rain in the night, but when she had pulled apart the chintz curtains and opened the wooden shutters the air was sweet and clean in her face, and the thin light showed the world rising joyously to the day.

She dressed hastily in her oldest clothes, stole on tiptoe to the kitchen for a biscuit and a glass of milk, found fishing tackle on the veranda, and was soon running breathlessly past the corrals toward the banks of the Brightwater. And all this was a deliberate deception. She purposed to fish, of course — a little, to justify the clandestine expedition; but what she really sought was solitude.

It was half in jest that she had said to Smythe, "He shall tell me!" But in the night, by some strange alchemy, that jest had been transmuted into a purpose of which she was still doubtful, if not afraid. And yet to go forward seemed less difficult than to go back. For she had let the days of Seth's recovery and convalescence slip by without telling Claire of her experience in the Forbidden Pasture and on the road to Paradise. The

duel at the post-office, she argued, surely had made it unnecessary to warn Huntington of Haig's anger. And yet, as their guest, as Claire's cousin — But had they been quite fair to her? They had not warned her of the hostility across the Ridge; they had let her go blundering into the Forbidden Pasture; not that it mattered so much, though it might have been worse —

Her thoughts were becoming very much confused. She had permitted a man to treat her most offensively, and she had seen him shoot down another without compunction; and that other was her cousin, in whose house she was a guest. And yet she felt no resentment, no detestation, no censure, no rebuke. Instead, here she was running away to think out a plan whereby she might hear the whole story of the feud, and more, from Haig himself.

The morning advanced in rose and pearl nuances. A hundred tantalizing perfumes filled the air; field-spiders' webs sparkled in the dew like silver gossamer; meadow larks rose at her feet, and wove delicate patterns in the air with threads of melody. Who could think amid such diverting beauty? She lifted her head, and went singing through the meadows, knee-deep in the wet and clinging grass, and laughing when the parted branches of the willows splashed her face and drenched her. And then, at the first cast she made into a still, deep pool, where the night loitered under the very eye of day, an imprudent trout took the gray hackle fly, and made off with it. The splash, and the "zip" of the tightening line through the water; and then the fight, and the capture — Well, if they were going to rise like that —

The sun was high before she became aware that she

was very hot and tired and hungry. Her shoes were soaking wet, her skirts and stockings splashed with mud; one shoulder was being sunburned where a twig had caught and ripped her white flannel waist; and Seth's red silk handkerchief around her neck was scarcely a deeper crimson than her face.

"But I can't catch them all in one day!" she exclaimed reluctantly, leaning wearily against a tree.

At that instant, under her very eyes, a trout leaped in the near-by pool.

"Impudence!" she cried. "I'll just get you, and then quit."

But it was one pool too many; for at the second cast her hook caught in the rough bark of a log that projected far out into the stream.

"Oh! Now I've done it!" she groaned.

Several smart tugs at the line, with a whipping of the rod to right and left of the log, convinced her that the hook was too deeply embedded to be released by any such operation. Sinking down on a heap of driftwood on the bank, she gloomily contemplated the consequences of her greed. There were two ways to go about it now, — to break the line and leave the hook to its fate, or to crawl out on the log and rescue it. The first was unsportsmanlike, the second was very likely to be dangerous.

"Um-m-m!" she muttered, with a grimace. "It's not easy."

The log ran out, at a slight inclination upward, from the center of the heap of driftwood, and its free end, where the hackle fly reposed at a distance of fully twenty feet from the bank, was suspended barely two feet above

the middle of the pool. She leaned forward, and gazed into its dark depths, which appeared to be scarcely stirred by the current, though five yards away the stream was making a merry racket over the shallows.

She stood up, and looked around her. Through the screen of willows and cottonwoods on each sloping bank she saw the meadows lying green and silent in the sun. There was no sound except the prattle of the Brightwater, and the murmur of the breeze in the foliage, She assured herself that she was quite alone.

Next she folded and pinned up her skirt so that it hung just to her knees, and after a final glance in all directions, stepped cautiously out to the edge of the driftwood, knelt down on the fallen trunk, and began to creep warily out toward the embedded hook. The log was round, and none too large; her knees, protected only by thin stockings, were bruised by the rough and partly-loosened bark; and she scarcely dared to breathe lest she should lose her balance, and tumble into the yawning pool. Once she incautiously looked down, and saw her image waving dizzily on the slow-moving surface of the water.

"Oh!" she gasped, as she drew back her gaze, and dug her nails into the log.

But for all her fears, and because of them, it was tremendously exciting, and she became deeply absorbed in her task. Now clinging close to the log in sudden panic, now laughing tremulously at her trepidation, she forgot everything except her goal, and the inches by which she was approaching it. She had arrived within two feet of the hook, and was just about to reach a trembling hand to detach it, when she received a shock

that was near to ending her expedition in an ignominious splash.

"Wait!" called out a voice, somewhere behind her. "I'll help you!"

The fright first nearly caused her to lose her grip on the log, and then left her cold and shivering. After that a wave of heat swept over her, and the blood tingled in her flushed and perspiring face.

Who was it? Philip Haig, by all the ill luck in the world? Who else could have had the effrontery? She dared not turn to look, both in fear of falling, and in shame at being caught in that absurd predicament. What a sight! she thought. Her skirt was above her knees, and one stocking, caught by a projection of bark, had slipped down to her ankle. And that was not all! . . . With a desperate effort, she lifted one hand from its hold on the log, and tried to adjust her skirt; but the movement only unbalanced her. With a shriek she flattened herself, and lay there panting and miserable.

"Wait!" the voice cried, more sharply than before. "No move — for minute!"

She was arrested by the words. "No move for minute!" It was not the voice of Philip Haig, but in that assurance there was only a doubtful consolation. If not Haig — who? There was something oddly foreign in that heavy, harsh, and yet not displeasing voice. A new fear presently mingled with the others. It was a wild country after all; and she had taken no note of the distance she had come, and little of her surroundings. But she could only obey, and wait.

There came the sound of quick splashing in the water, and a few seconds later a man's head and shoulders

appeared in the stream at her side. At sight of the strange, dark countenance suddenly upturned to her, within a foot of her own, she almost fainted. It was a face she had never seen before, solemn, stolid, with a copper-colored skin, high cheek bones, and deep-set, black eyes in which there was no more expression than there was on the thin, straight lips. She closed her eyes.

But that was only for an instant, since nothing terrible was happening. When she dared to look again the man was quietly releasing the offending fly. He tossed it back in the direction of the bank, then stood for a moment regarding her, still without the trace of an expression on his dark face.

"Don't be 'fraid!" he said. "Hold still!"

She obeyed him, though his next move was one to have brought a scream to her lips if she had not become incapable of utterance. Standing in the water, which came almost up to his armpits, he had kept his arms high above the surface of the pool. Now he stretched them out toward her, clasped both her ankles with one huge hand, slipped the other under her waist, and with what seemed incredible strength and assurance, lifted her off the log. Then, without so much as wetting the edge of her skirt, he bore her to the bank, and seated her gently on the heap of driftwood from which she had ventured so bravely only a little while before.

Should she weep, or laugh, or rage at him? Through eyes half-blinded by tears, she searched his face; but he met her troubled and fiery gaze with the most perfect calm. Then, after a moment, he deliberately turned, and stood facing squarely away from her,— an act of stoicism that at once removed her fears and completed

her discomfiture. She took the hint implied in his movement, and bent down, blushing furiously, to pull up the fallen stocking, and let down her skirt.

When she sat erect again the man had not changed his position; and she seized the opportunity to study him. His figure, though she had just had proof of his strength, was lean almost to thinness, very straight, and borne, she fancied, with a certain dignity and even majesty in its erectness. The straight, black hair under the sombrero was touched with gray. He was not young, past middle age perhaps; but she could hazard no nearer guess at his age. No matter! Looking at him thus, she began to feel her resentment falling away, as if every shaft from her angry eyes had broken harmlessly on that serene and unoffending back. Even her embarrassment began to seem inexcusable. The man had carried her ashore in much the manner he would have used if she had been a sack of oats to be saved from wetting.

"You are very strong!" Marion said at last.

He turned slowly toward her. His face was grave and expressionless, but by no means dull; and his eyes were very black and bright.

"You — are — all — right — now?" he asked, ignoring her praise.

There was a curious slowness and lack of emphasis in his speech, with a pause after each word, that gave a singular impressiveness to all he said.

"But why did you do it?" she demanded.

"'Fraid you fall," was his simple answer.

"But I don't mind getting wet."

"Easy drown in little water," he said laconically.

She laughed at the idea of her drowning in a pool like that — she who had battled triumphantly with the breakers at Atlantic City, Newport, and Bar Harbor.

"But I can swim!" she assured him.

"I not know that," he replied, unmoved.

True. And she must have appeared to be greatly in need of assistance.

"Anyhow, I thank you!" she said sincerely. "But who am I thanking, please?"

"Pete."

"Pete! Pete who?"

"Only Pete."

"But have you no other name?"

"Yes. Indian name."

And he rolled out a string of guttural syllables that sounded like names of places in the Maine woods.

Indian name! Marion started; and in a flash she knew. Haig's man Friday! Here was luck indeed.

"You are Mr. Haig's —" She hesitated.

"Friend," he said, completing her sentence.

Marion was again embarrassed. She did not know what to say next, fearing to say the wrong thing, and so to throw away a golden opportunity. In her search for the right lead, her eyes lighted on a fishing basket that lay on the ground not far from her own.

"Oh!" she cried. "But it's strange I didn't hear or see you!"

"Indian not make noise."

"I should say not!" she retorted, laughing.

"Trout very smart," he added quietly.

"I've caught fourteen," she volunteered eagerly. "And you?"

For answer he fetched his creel, and opened it.

"Oh!" she cried, in envy and admiration, seeing that the creel was almost full, and that not a fish in sight was as small as her largest prize.

"I give you some," he said, glancing at her own basket.

"No! No!" she protested quickly. "I have plenty."

She showed him her catch, which was by no means insignificant. Nevertheless Pete took three of his largest trout, and transferred them to her basket, ignoring her protests.

"But they are for — him, aren't they?" she asked.

"Biggest you no see. At bottom."

That satisfied her, and she watched him silently while he found her rod, and reeled in the offending fly.

"Brown fly better now," he said. "You ought see what trout eating before you try catch big ones."

On this he drew a book of flies from his pocket, and replaced the gray hackle with a brown one. She questioned him eagerly, following this plain lead; and presently they were seated on the pile of driftwood, while he told her about the native trout and the rainbow and the California, of little brooks far up among the mountains where the trout were small but of a delicious flavor, of the time for flies and the time for worms, of famous catches he had made, of the way the Indians fished before the white man showed them patent rods and reels. By slow degrees Pete's iron features softened, and he smiled at her, not with his lips, but with his eyes, which were the blackest, surely, in the world.

But Marion was not diverted from the questions that

were next her heart. With all her woman's cunning of indirection, she brought the talk around to Philip Haig. Did he fish? Sometimes. Did he hunt? Much, when the deer came down from the heights with the first snows. Then — she could resist no longer.

"It must have been terrible — the accident," she said, placing a finger on her cheek.

He looked at her strangely, while she held her breath.

"That no accident," he said at last, after what seemed to her an interminable interval of suspense.

"No accident?" she repeated, trying not to appear too eager.

"He call it accident, maybe. He say it is nothing. Pete say it is much. It is big debt. Some day Pete pay."

There was deep silence for a moment. The stream gurgled and splashed; the breeze whispered through the cottonwoods; and over all, or under all, was the vague, insistent, seductive sound that the summer makes in the fulness of its power.

Marion hesitated, quivering with eagerness and uncertainty. She was afraid to ask more, lest she should be shortly rebuffed, and lose her opportunity. But Pete was looking at her steadily. She felt a flush coming into her face again. Had he guessed — something — already in her manner, in her impulsive questions? More likely it was the charm that, for once unconsciously, she wielded — the elusive charm of woman that makes men want to tell, without the asking.

"You like to hear?" Pete said; and her heart leaped.

"Oh, please!"

And she was keenly disappointed. She had expected

something romantic, something ennobling and fine. And it was only a barroom brawl, though Philip was not in it until the end, to be sure! Five Mexican sheep herders against the lone Indian. Guns and knives in the reeking border saloon; and afterwards in the street; and the Indian almost done for, bleeding from a dozen wounds; and then a voice ringing out above the fracas: "No, I'm damned if you do! Five to one, and greasers at that!" And Philip Haig had jumped from his horse, and plunged into the mêlée, disdaining to draw his gun on greasers. Smash! Bang! went his fists, front and right and left.

Pete had accounted for one Mexican, who would herd sheep no more on the plains of Conejos. The others fled. Then Haig, despite the knife-wound in his face, grabbed the Indian, and somehow lifted him up behind him on his horse.

"Quick, Indian!" he cried. "This town's full of greasers. You've got no chance here."

And then the long ride to Del Norte, with the Indian drooping on Haig's back; and a doctor of Haig's acquaintance, who sheltered and cured the silent savage. And Pete, convalescent, had come straight to Haig's ranch, and remained there, despite Haig's protests that he did not need another hand.

"Pete stay until big debt is paid," said the Indian solemnly. And then, with a straight look into Marion's eyes, "You ought tell Huntington he is damn fool."

Marion started. There it was again — the warning!

"But why?" she managed to ask.

"Haig is brave man. Brave man always good man. So — Huntington got no chance."

CHAPTER VII

THE WAY OF A MAID WITH A MAN

SHE rode casually down the Brightwater, and casually up the Brightwater; she loitered at crossroads, and tarried at Thompson's store; and not one glimpse did she catch of Philip Haig. Then one morning she rose at dawn, as she had risen on the day of her fishing exploit, with a purpose. But this time she dressed with exceeding care, in a riding suit she had not yet worn in the Park. It was soft dove-gray in color, with a long coat that showed the fine lines of her figure and, when she rode, revealed snug-fitting breeches above the tops of the polished boots,— a very different costume from the black divided skirts and the short jacket in which she had galloped about the Park.

Thus arrayed and resolute, she rode straight down the valley to the branch road that had once tempted her to adventure; straight up the hill; and straight through the woods until she halted once more in the shade of the outpost pine that stood beyond its clustered fellows like a sentinel above the valley. Her valley! She waited a moment, wondering if it welcomed her. There was the stream, still flashing in the sun, the meadows as brightly green as then, the grass of the pasture running in bronze waves before the breeze. From the heart of a wild rose a gorgeous red and brown butterfly flew out and fluttered over her head. Not a dozen yards below her a meadow

lark, unseen, burst into sudden, thrilling song; and somewhere down the hill another took up the strain, then another and another, until the air was charged and quivering with melody, piercing sweet. She listened, her heart throbbing to the music, until the chorus died away in dripping cadences, and only a drowsy murmur came from the ripening fields to mingle with the low droning of the pine organ on the hill. Yes! Her valley welcomed her.

She rode on down the hill, with only a quick and embarrassed glance into the Forbidden Pasture; and suddenly raised herself excitedly in the stirrups. There again was the spiral of blue smoke; then a chimney and a red roof; and finally the house itself, and barn and corrals, all tucked away against the foot of the hill. Dismounting, she led Tuesday back a few yards, and left him to feed along the roadside. Then she returned, and seated herself on a rock, half-hidden by a blackberry bush, to study the group of houses lying low and silent in the sun.

There were more buildings than at Huntington's, but she saw no beds of flowers, no wide veranda screened with potted plants; a certain bareness and air of inhospitality, she thought. No tea and angel cake for visitors! Behind the ranch house were two cottages of unpainted pine, scorched to a yellow-brown by many a summer sun. One of them, doubtless, was the hermit's lodge. The barn, larger than Seth's, had a red roof, newly painted. And in one of the corrals — yes — the flash of a golden hide.

"Sunnysides!" murmured Marion.

Then her heart stood still. She had descried the rig

ure of a man seated with his back against the bars of this corral. But it was not Philip Haig; Sunnysides' guard, no doubt, for he never left his post until relieved by another an hour or so later, when the dinner bell had been rung at the door of the ranch house.

She had scarcely time to feel her disappointment before a man emerged from the stable leading a saddle horse. Another immediately followed, and this time there was no mistake. The second man was Philip Haig. He mounted quickly, and started off; then stopped to address a word or two, apparently, to the man at the stable door; and finally galloped past the ranch house and the cottages, and up the slope behind them toward the pines, across the valley from where she sat.

"Oh!" cried Marion, in a tone of vexation and reproach.

She watched him until he had disappeared among the trees; and tears started in her eyes. Would he always be riding away from her, behind the hills, the woods, a turn of the road? She sat a while in deep dejection; but not for long. Her spirit was too resilient for futile moping, and her purpose too firmly held to be abandoned on one reverse. She reflected that if he had gone he must as certainly return; and so, with a toss of her head, she presently arose, and fetched her raincoat and her luncheon from the saddle. The coat she spread out on the ground, seated herself on it with her back against the rock, and settled down to eat, and watch, and wait.

Morning mounted hot and humming into noon, and noon dropped languidly into afternoon. The blazing sun centered his rays upon her; insects found and pes-

tered her; discomfort cramped her limbs, and weariness weighted down her eyelids. Twice she dozed, and wakened with a start of fear lest she had slept her chance away. But each time she was reassured by a hurried survey of the group of buildings, where no one stirred, and there was no sign of Philip Haig. So the hours dragged their slow length along.

It was late in the afternoon before her vigil was rewarded. Not from just the direction in which he had galloped away, but from farther up the valley, Haig reappeared. He rode as rapidly as before, straight to the door of the stable, reined up a moment there, and was off again,— this time down the valley on a white road that was visible to Marion until it curved behind the distant point of the ridge on which she sat.

"Now where's he going?" she murmured, wrinkling her forehead as she saw him once more vanish from her sight.

She did not know that road, but guessed that it joined the main highway somewhere far down the Brightwater. No matter! Here was her opportunity; for she saw, with quick appreciation, that she would now be able to place herself between him and the ranch buildings without showing herself to the men at the corrals. And then? She could not "hold him up" like a highwayman; and if she did not stop him he would raise his hat (perhaps), and ride past her without a word. And how was she to stop him? She had come there with a very definite purpose, but with no clear plan, trusting to the inspiration of the moment. And now the moment had arrived; but where was the inspiration? She had risen impulsively to her feet, and stood

staring between narrowed eyelids, and beneath a puckered brow, at the white road now quite empty again. Then suddenly —

"Ah!" she gasped.

And thereupon she blushed, and looked furtively around her, as if she had been caught in some doubtful, if not discreditable, act. But there was no time for moral subtleties. She staggered — for her legs were stiff from inaction — to her pony, replaced her raincoat behind the saddle, mounted in hot haste, and rode down the steep hill toward the houses. At a little distance from them the road she traveled joined the other. There she turned abruptly, and followed the unfamiliar road until she was safely out of sight of any chance observer at the barn, and yet not so far from the trail she had just left but that she could return to it if, by any chance, he should come back that way.

Dismounting quickly at the chosen spot, she turned Tuesday until he stood squarely across the road. Then her nimble fingers flew at the cinches of the saddle.

"There now!" she exclaimed, hot with excitement and exertion.

She stepped back to view her handiwork, and laughed nervously. Next she drew a tiny mirror and a bit of chamois skin from her bosom, and swiftly removed some of the dust and moisture from her flushed face. Then her hair, always somewhat unruly, required a touch or two. That done, she smoothed down the gray coat over her slender hips, adjusted the gray silk tie at her throat, and waited.

He came, in his habitual cloud of dust; pulled up his pony within ten feet of the obstruction; saw the saddle

hanging at a dangerous angle over Tuesday's side; and accepted the obvious conclusion that Miss Marion Gaylord, looking very warm and embarrassed, but certainly very pretty in her confusion, had narrowly escaped a fall.

"I think I'd better help you with that, Miss Gaylord," he said.

"Thank you!" she said, with an appealing reluctance. "I can do it — I often saddle my own horse, and —"

"I should judge that you had saddled him this time," he interrupted her to say, without the slightest trace of irony in his tone.

She bit her lip, as she silently made way for him, and stood at Tuesday's head, stroking his neck with one small, gloved hand while Haig adjusted the blanket, fitted the saddle firmly, and tightened the double cinch. He was dressed in the nondescript costume he had worn at their first meeting. That same hat, uniquely insolent, soiled and limp and disreputable, was stuck on the back of his head, revealing a full, clean-moulded brow, over which, at one side, his thick black hair fell carelessly. His eyes were calm gray rather than stormy black to-day, but a gray that was singularly dark and deep and luminous. His manner was in the strangest contrast with the two different moods in which she had already seen him — as if the fires were out, as if all emotion and interest had been dissolved in listlessness. And she divined at once that her chance of success was small.

"That will hold, I think," he said gravely; and started toward his horse.

"It wasn't Tuesday's fault," she said eagerly.

Haig paused, on one foot as it were, and looked over his shoulder.

"It was fortunate for you that he's been well gentled," he said. "You should look to your cinches rather often when you ride these hills."

("You should keep your feet dry, and come in when it rains," he might as well have said, she thought angrily.)

"Yes, it was careless of me," she answered, trying to say it brightly, but really wanting to shriek.

"It happens to everybody once in a while," he said.

On that, he stepped to his pony, put a foot in the stirrup, and one hand on the saddle horn, and paused.

She could easily have flopped down in the road, and wept. Once he had raged at her, once he had thrilled her with a look, and now he was simply dismissing her, — leaving her, as her father would have put it, "to stew in her own juice." She saw all her elaborate strategy, her long vigil on the hill, her struggle with the saddle, her appealing glances — all, all about to go for nothing.

"He might at least help me on my horse!" she thought, in bitter resentment.

Perhaps tears blinded her. At any rate — and this was without pretence, and no part of her scheme — she did not see clearly what she was doing. It was nothing new to mount her pony from the level; she had done it a hundred times without mishap. But now, in her agitation, she stood somewhat too far away from Tuesday's shoulder; and the pony, as ponies will sometimes do,

started forward the instant he felt the weight in the stirrup.

"Look out!" cried Haig.

It was too late. She missed the saddle; her right foot struck Tuesday's back, and slipped off; and she fell sprawling on the ground, with her left foot fast in the stirrup.

"Whoa, Tuesday!" she cried shrilly as she fell.

Luckily the horse did not take alarm and run, as a less reliable animal might have done, dragging the girl under his heels. He stopped in his tracks, and stood obediently, even turning his head as if to see what damage had been done. It was enough. Marion was uninjured, but badly frightened; and her humiliation was complete. She lay on her back, struggling vainly to extricate her foot from the stirrup. Her coat skirts had fallen back, and — Thank Heaven for the riding breeches, and not what she had worn under divided skirts!

"Lie still!" yelled Haig, remembering what he had seen happen to men in such circumstances.

In three leaps he was at her side. With a swift movement (and none too gentle), he wrenched her foot loose from the stirrup, and helped her to sit up, dazed and trembling and very white.

"Your ankle — is it hurt?" he asked sharply.

"I don't know," she said.

And then the expected "inspiration of the moment" came.

"A little," she added.

And so it was done. Her foot had indeed been twisted slightly; she had truly, *truly* felt a twinge of

pain. At another time she would have thought no more about it, but now — The color rushed back into her cheeks; she fetched a smile that was half a grimace; and the game was on again.

Haig reached a hand to her. She took it, and let him draw her to her feet.

"Try the ankle — just a step!" he commanded.

She rested her weight on her left foot.

"Oh!" she cried out, and looked helplessly at Haig.

A shadow, unmistakably of annoyance, passed over his face.

"You're not going to faint, are you?" he asked, looking keenly at her.

Her color always came and went easily, and now, a little frightened by her bold deception, she was pale again.

"No — I think not," she said. ("At any rate not here," she might have added.)

"Can you ride to the corrals?" was his next question.

The look of annoyance was now fixed on his face, but it did not discourage her.

"Yes, if —"

She looked doubtfully at Tuesday. Thereupon, without a word, Haig led the horse close to her, but placed so that she was at Tuesday's right side instead of the left. Then, while she supported herself with one hand on his shoulder, he raised her right foot, and thrust it into the stirrup; and, with a hand under each of her arms, lifted her until she was able to throw the left foot over, and her body into the saddle. Once more Marion bit her lip. His action was as devoid of personal interest as Pete's had been when he carried her out of the

pool; and she had not come to Philip Haig to be treated like a sack of oats!

Haig mounted his pony, and rode up close beside her; and thus, in unbroken silence, they arrived at the door of the stable. There Haig dismounted quickly, stepped briskly around her horse, and almost before she was aware of his intention, lifted her out of the saddle, and set her on her feet — all very carefully and gently, but also very scrupulously, without an unnecessary pressure, without even a glance into her waiting eyes. What was the man made of? Why would he not look at her? Why did he not rage at her — if he could do nothing better? Well, the cat had at least seven lives left!

She almost forgot to limp, but bethought herself in time, and gasped as he led her to an empty soap box at the side of the stable door. Having seated her there, he called out to the man on guard at Sunnysides' corral: "Where's Curly?"

"Down by the crick," was the answer.

"Bring him here! I'll watch the horse."

Thereupon he took the man's place, and stood with his arms crossed on the top rail of the fence, his eyes fixed on the golden horse. And Marion felt a real pain at last,— a pang of jealousy. So he preferred to look at the horse, did he? If he had chanced at that instant to glance at her he would have seen a pair of blue eyes blazing with wrath.

The two men came hurrying from the creek.

"Here, Curly!" said Haig, resigning his post. "Miss Gaylord has hurt her ankle. I found her unseated down the road yonder." He paused, as if to

let that be thoroughly understood. "I want you to hitch up the sorrels and drive her home."

"Right!" responded Curly, going into the stable.

Marion then did almost faint. She had not foreseen that manœuver.

"I'd rather not, please," she said, as sweetly as she could in her dismay.

"Rather not what?" asked Haig, turning at last to her.

"I'd rather rest a while — somewhere —" Her glance went past him in the direction of the cottage. "Then I can ride home — alone."

"And tumble off in the road somewhere!" he retorted, with a touch of derision in his tone.

"Oh, no!" she pleaded. "It's not as bad as that."

"No matter! I can't allow you to take any chances," he insisted curtly.

"Really, I need only a little rest," she persisted. "If I could lie down a few minutes —" her eyes again were turned toward the cottage.

He saw what she meant, and frowned.

"No!" he snapped. Then, checking himself, "I don't mean to be inhospitable, but you ought to know that's impossible."

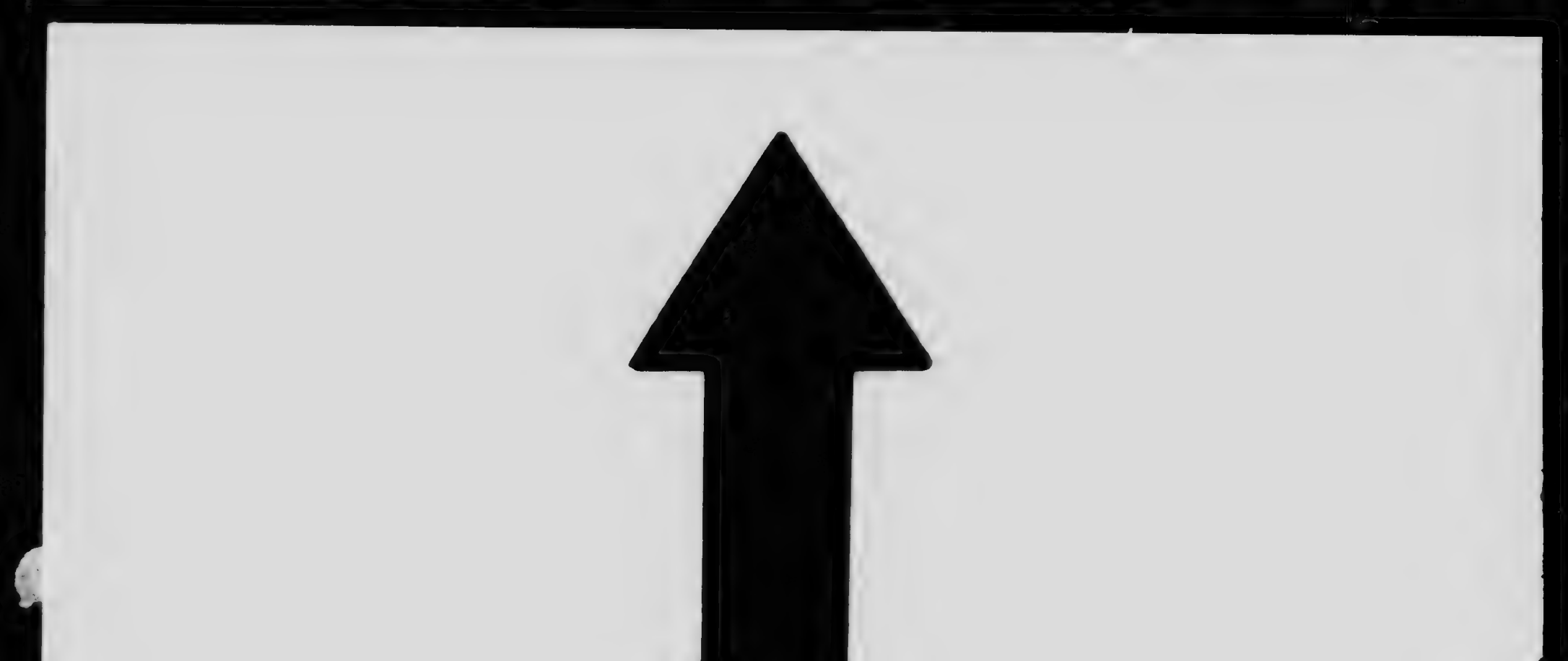
"You mean — Cousin Seth?"

He shot a look at her that frightened her, but gratified her too. Was she rousing him at last?

"Yes, if you like," he said, quietly enough. "I'm having a hard enough time with the fool without a woman being mixed up in the affair."

"I don't understand," said Marion.

"You don't understand!" he repeated. "Of course



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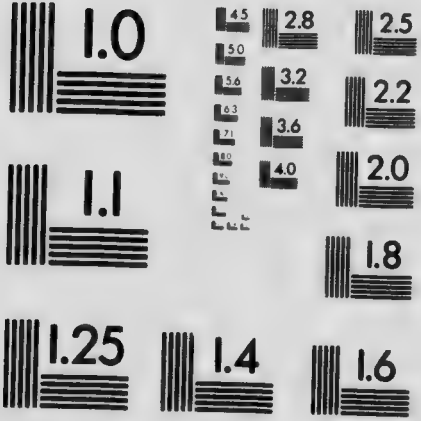

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not. Women never understand — until afterwards. I'll make it plainer. I'm a bad man, as you have doubtless heard. What would Paradise Park say when it learned that you had been inveigled into my house?"

She was silent a moment.

"Well then, let me sit here and rest!" she insisted.

"But why?" he demanded impatiently.

She took her courage in both hands, and plunged.

"I want to talk to you," she said eagerly. "I want to ask you if there is no way —"

"Excuse me!" he broke in. "I don't want you to talk to me. If I did —"

He stopped, with a shrug. Marion felt her face reddening, but she dissembled her embarrassment.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "You're not afraid of me, are you?"

It was spoken archly, in her most playful, most kittenish manner, and so she was amazed to see his face distorted as if by some violent emotion. But he spoke with restraint, though in a tone that was hard and harsh.

"Yes, I am afraid of you. The only thing in the world a man needs to fear is a woman."

The first effect of this speech was to surprise and shock her. The next was to make her heart leap. Had she come near the secret, after all? Then, finally, something deep in the man's eyes roused in her a thrill of pity. In another minute she would have melted, in her compassion, and begged him humbly to pardon her. But at that instant Curly emerged from the barn, leading the sorrels; and the devil that lurks behind a woman's tongue spoke for her before she was aware of it.

"So you'd rather one of your men took me to Cousin Seth!"

It was scarcely out before she regretted it with all her heart. If there was a devil behind her tongue there was another back of the somber shadows in Haig's eyes. He flashed one comprehending look at her; his whole manner underwent a swift and terrifying change; he was again the Philip Haig of that day at the post-office.

"Great!" he exclaimed. "That will be the best joke of all. I'll drive you home myself, of course."

For a moment Marion sat very still on the soap box, stunned, staring open-mouthed at Haig. What had she done? That mad speech! Then she leaped to her feet.

"No! No!" she cried. "You shall not!"

He smiled at her.

"Shall not?" he repeated sardonically.

"I mean — please not that!" she faltered.

"Why not?" he demanded, almost gaily.

"Oh, please! I didn't mean it that way."

"Of course you didn't mean it! Women never do mean it — that way. And I suppose you didn't mean to let those men ride on to Paradise when they told you the horse was mine, did you?"

"Oh!" cried Marion, almost in a scream. "How did you — know?"

He laughed.

"I happened to ask Larkin if he had met nobody on the road who could have directed him. He said there was no one but a 'purty girl.' That was you, wasn't it?"

She was speechless.

"And my warning to Huntington. Did you deliver that?"

"No," she answered, scarcely above a whisper.

"Of course not. That would have been too simple and honest and direct. You can't be honest and straightforward to save your lives. You live by deception, and boast about your love of truth. Your deepest craving is for violence, while you prate about your gentle influence over men. I haven't the least doubt in the world that Mrs. Huntington, for all her baby face, is back of all Huntington's violence — thinks she's a wonderful inspiration to him, with a special genius for the cattle business! And when she gets him killed — with your assistance — she'll flop down, and weep — and you too, both of you — and wail that you didn't mean it!"

She recoiled from him, and leaned helplessly against the wall of the stable.

"So you let the men ride on to Paradise," he went on with relentless mockery, "and you let Huntington plunge into that business when you knew, from me, exactly what it meant. And you rode over here to-day — I wonder, now, if your foot's really hurt, or if that also is some trick!"

It was the merest chance shot. He had no suspicion that she had been shamming, for he had been too much annoyed by the whole incident to be critical of her demeanor. But the shot went home. The girl, without a word or cry, suddenly sank down on the box, with her face buried in her hands.

There ensued a moment of tense silence. For all the bitterness that surged under his railing speech, Haig

was not untouched by the sight of the girl, bent and cowering before him. But at the same time he was exasperated anew by the scene that was being enacted under the eyes of his two men.

"Come!" he said presently, not without reluctant gentleness. "It's growing late. We must start at once."

The words increased her terror. Through the hands that covered her eyes she could see Haig and Huntington — with revolvers drawn; and Claire's white face — She rose impulsively, dropping her hands from her hot and tear-stained cheeks. She would confess all to him, though it should betray the inmost secret of her heart; and would beseech him not to go —

"Don't say it — here!" he commanded sharply, lowering his voice as he bent toward her. "They think there's something queer about all this. Come!"

She obeyed him silently, her resolution vanishing before his authority. Besides, there was yet time, somewhere on the road.

CHAPTER VIII

THE END OF HER STRATAGEM

FOR some minutes there was no speech, no sound except the swift beat of the horses' hoofs on the hard roadway, and the crisp crunching of wheels in the sand. Marion sat rigid, staring straight in front of her, yet seeing nothing. Dazed and benumbed, her thoughts were in a hopeless tangle, without beginnings, without ends. How she had bungled the whole thing! And she might have been so happy, there at his side.

Twilight was coming on in the serene, clear beauty of the mountains: the distant peaks glowed like great opals in the sundown hues; there was an indescribable sweetness in the air, something magical in the soft but cold night breeze that began to pour down upon the valley from the eternal snows.

Timidly, out of the corner of her eye, Marion glanced at Haig, and saw that he was gazing steadily at the changing colors on the distant range. But there was no beauty for her in that perfect panorama. The fire had gone out of her, and she was shivering. He must have felt her movement, for suddenly he leaned forward, lifted the edge of the heavy laprobe that had lain neglected at their feet, and tucked it around her. She drew back with a quick intake of breath as his face was for an instant close to her own. A moment later he began to speak in a tone that surprised and encouraged

her, so little did it resemble the tones he had employed before. It was as if nothing had happened, as if they had long been talking of things casual, impersonal to them both.

"It's different in the San Luis," he said. "There's red down there. Nature's palette is a little short of red in this valley. Too much blue. Even nature sometimes gets a one-color obsession, like the painters. Here she's gone off on blue. It's the most dangerous color. Darwin says it was the last color produced in nature's laboratory. Ordinarily it's the least common in flowers and birds and insects. Hearn — Have you read Lafcadio Hearn? No? But you ought to, that is, if you care for such things. He goes after blue — the misuse of it. He says it's the color most pleasureable to the eye in its purest intensity. But you mustn't dab it on. A blue house is a crime. Blue's overdone here too, blue sky, blue mists, blue shadows, blue lakes, blue flowers,— anemones, harebells, columbines and the rest. It's a relief to get into the reds of the San Luis —"

"Where Sunnysides came from!" interrupted Marion, eager despite her misery.

"Yes."

"Tell me about him, please!"

She wanted him to continue in that strain, and even Sunnysides was a less dangerous subject than — another.

"Well, about Sangre de Cristo first. That's a great range that stands up high and white along the east. Sangre de Cristo is Spanish for Blood of Christ. I can see those pious old rascal adventurers uncovering their blessed heads when they first glimpsed it. At sun-

set it takes the color — not always, not often, in fact, perhaps a dozen times a year. There are days and days when the range is only white and cold, days when it's black with storms, and days when it's dismal gray. Then there comes an evening when the sun goes down red behind the San Juan, and the snows on Sangre de Cristo run like blood. The whole world, for a few minutes, seems to halt and stand still in awe at that weird and mysterious spectacle — trainmen setting the brakes on squealing ore trains on Marshall Pass, and miners coming out of their tunnels above Creed all stop and look; Mexican sheep-herders in Conejos pause to cross themselves; ranchmen by their lonely corrals up and down the San Luis, and cowboys in the saddle on the open range — all spellbound. It gives you a strange feeling — something that goes back to the primitive instincts of mankind — something of reverence, something of wonder, something of fear — the fear that the first men had when they gazed on the phenomena they could not understand, and began to make their myths and their religions. Primitive superstition, primitive terror will never quite down in us, no matter how wise and practical we become. There's always, in beauty — in sheer beauty something terrifying, as well as something sad. But — do I bore you with my dithyrambs?"

"No! No!" she exclaimed.

"The scene couldn't have been set better for that spectacle. There's a green strip along the river, then bare sagebrush flats, and beyond the flats are sand dunes where nothing grows but cactus and mesquite, and here and there some tufts of grass as tough and dry as wire. In summer the dunes are a parched and blistered in-

ferno. In October they are raw gray desolation. I don't want to know what they are like in winter. The wind never ceases there. It builds the dunes into new shapes every day, and the sagebrush is always bent and lopsided and torn, and the colors are the gray and brown of the world's secret tragedy. But when the red sunset is on the dunes there's nothing I have ever seen so wild and passionate and beautiful.

"It was late in the autumn. I rode out of a deep arroya, and came, without warning, into all that weird and solemn glory. There was a cold gush of air from up the valley. Far in the north were purple patches on the flats, and violet shadows in the foothills. But the dunes were all vermilion, and I can't tell you what hue of red lay spread out deep and vivid on the Sangre de Cristo peaks,— a living, passionate, terrible blood-red. I'm not very devout, but I tell you candidly that I reined up my horse, took off my hat, and sat there gazing, with the queerest feelings, and saying, like the old Spaniards, 'Sangre de Cristo! Blood of Christ!'

"Then something queer happened to me. You've seen a flash of sunlight reflected from a window, far off? Well, it wasn't like that, except in the sharpness of its effect. And I knew there was no house in all that waste of sand. It was just a flash, and was gone. I searched the horizon, and saw nothing but red dunes, and little puffs of sand kicked up by the rising wind. Must have been some trick of vision, I thought, and I looked away again toward the blood-red peaks. And there it was again, in the corner of my eye. But it was gone when I tried to fix it. I put spurs to my horse, and rode toward the dunes, and caught the flash again — just a bright

yellow speck in the darkening vermilion. It came and went, and seemed then to have been lost completely. I was about convinced that the red sunset had gone to my head — that I was following something that existed only in my brain.

"Then, as I loped up to the top of a dune — there he stood, on another dune, perhaps two hundred yards away. His golden hide reflected the red glow like polished metal, his mane flamed in the wind. You cannot possibly imagine the effect of it, in that unreal light, in that setting of desolation, with the crimson mountains behind him. He stood alone on the hill, with his head high, motionless as a statue. For as long as half a minute he let me look at him. Then he turned, and was gone like a flash of fire. I had just one more glimpse of him, flying over the dunes, and followed by a score or more of wild horses of all colors except his color, and none worth looking at. With him the red went out of the landscape, the peaks turned white, and I sat alone in the gray, raw twilight. But right there I made up my mind about one thing: I must have that horse. You know the rest."

"But what do you mean to do with him?" asked Marion, vaguely troubled.

"Ride him."

"Don't!" she gasped.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"He'll kill you!"

Haig laughed.

"Oh, I think not!"

"But what is the use?"

"What's the use of anything?"

"But it's —"

"Mere folly, you think?"

"Yes."

"Now you don't mean that at all, Miss Gaylord. You know perfectly well that if I were doing it to please you — to win your admiration — you wouldn't call it folly."

"You will please me — and win my admiration — if you don't do it. Please!"

"But I don't want — You'll pardon me? — I don't want to win your admiration."

What could she say to that? There was a moment of silence.

"When?" she asked quietly.

"I'm waiting for Farrish, my foreman. He's the only man I can absolutely depend upon. He's in Omaha. He'll be back next week."

"And you won't begin without him?"

"No."

She had no choice but to be satisfied with a few days of grace. Moreover, something might happen before the return of Farrish; the outlaw might escape, or she might find another opportunity to plead with Haig, or — What was she thinking of? Something was going to happen that very evening; and she had almost forgotten it, in her absorption!

She had meant to do, long before now, what he had prevented her doing at the stable,— to confess her deception, to plead for mercy, to beg him to go back. Failing in that, there was Tuesday trotting behind the trap; she could leap out, prove to Haig that her foot was uninjured, and insist upon riding home alone. But now

the confession seemed ten times more difficult than it had seemed in the first flush of her resolution. They were far up the Brightwater by this time; a few minutes more would bring them to the branch road that led to Huntington's. Yet how could she tell him?

"My foot doesn't hurt any more," she began, compromising with her resolution.

"That's because you've been sitting still," he replied.

"But it doesn't hurt when I move it. See!"

She lifted the foot, and rested it on the dashboard, bending and twisting it.

"By which you mean to tell me that I am to go back," he said.

"Please!"

"No!" he answered curtly.

"It wasn't badly sprained at all," she persisted. "I was only —" She caught herself, with a sneak. "I was only frightened, I think."

"I don't believe you."

"But it's the truth."

"Then it was not the truth in the first place."

There it was now, her best occasion to come out with it. But no; she could not.

"It's not so bad as I feared," she stammered.

"I trust not. A sprain is a bad business."

"But you'll go back now!" she pleaded.

"No."

"Oh, why won't you?"

"I've started."

"That's not the reason!" she cried desperately.

"True, there's another reason. That makes two."

"What other reason?"

"I want to ask Huntington about his health."

The deviltry had come back into his voice; and just ahead of them she saw the fork of the road.

"There's a third reason too, I'm afraid," she answered bitterly.

"What's that, do you think?"

"You want to punish me!"

"Perhaps — a little."

"Do you think that's —"

"Noble? Manly? Kind? Generous?" he broke in.

"Do you really think it's worth your while to punish me?" she asked with passionate irony.

"Yes."

"But why?"

"Because I hope to be let alone hereafter."

At that her anger rose.

"Do you think that is the way a man should speak to a woman?"

"It seems to be the only way to make a woman understand. And even then —"

She felt that he shrugged his shoulders in the darkness.

"Then I'm sorry for the women you have known!" she retorted.

"That should make it all the easier for you to avoid any more accidents in my part of the Park," he answered unperturbed. "It's your own fault if I'm rude. I haven't forced my attentions upon you. If you feel that you've been mistreated, there's another reason — that makes four, doesn't it? — for my going to Huntington's. We'll be there in five minutes. You can tell him."

She could find no answer to all this. Brutal as it was, she knew that she had deserved it. Her anger fell away, for she had found already that she could not be angry with him long; and now, even in her torment, she began to be sorry for him, wondering what he had passed through that had so hardened and embittered him.

But the team had turned into the branch road; and she must act at once. There remained but one thing for her to do: to leap out of the trap, and refuse to go farther with him. On the thought, she measured the distance to the ground, the speed of the trotting sorrels. Perhaps she moved a little. Or had he actually read her thoughts? For suddenly, but very quietly, he laid a hand on her shoulder.

"No!" he said. "You might really hurt yourself this time."

She sank back in dismay, but with a thrill of admiration. What was this man, who knew her thoughts before she herself knew them, who mastered her — and despised her? She trembled, and was glad of the night that concealed her flushed face from him As for her purpose, she was at the end of her resources. No confession, no plea would avail to shake his determination. She could do no more; and judgment was upon her — soon.

"Hold the reins, please!" commanded Haig.

He leaped out of the trap, opened the gate, and closed it when he had led the sorrels through. Then he climbed into the trap, and drove on. There was no moon. The ranch buildings lay huddled and indistinct in the dim starlight.

At the sound of the hoofs and wheels a man emerged from the stable, bearing a lantern. He hurried up to them, stumbling sleepily, and peering at the figures vaguely seen in the gloom.

"Here, Williams!" Haig said shortly. "Hold my team, will you! I'll be only a few minutes."

The lantern fell from the man's hand, struck the ground with a clatter, and lay on its side, flaming and smoking.

"Pick it up!" ordered Haig.

The man obeyed, with the suddenness of a jack-in-the-box, and stood as if petrified.

"Quick! The horses! They're no damned broncos!"

Williams jumped to the bridles; and a gleam from the lantern showed Marion his face. His mouth was open, his eyes staring with incredulity and alarm. She was seized with a preposterous desire to laugh at that comical visage, made grotesque by the wavering light of the lantern that danced in the fellow's hand. She was on the verge of hysteria.

Haig leaped out, and held up his arms for her, snapping his fingers impatiently. In almost complete inertia, yet with every nerve quivering, she let him help her to the ground, where he placed her arm in his, and started toward the ranch house.

"Limp! Limp!" he whispered in her ear.

She obeyed him mechanically. Everything seemed to have become very still and cold; feeling had frozen in her limbs; terror clutched at her icily out of the gloom. There were two lighted windows in front of her, two baleful yellow gleams, like the eyes of a monster of the

night. At any instant the door would open, gulping her in.

She choked down a cry. Her feet were like lead now, and she stumbled on the first of the half-dozen steps that led to the veranda. Haig pulled her up quickly, flung his right arm around her waist, and fairly carried her up the steps. At that moment, just as they stood on the level floor, the door was opened, and Huntington's huge body appeared in silhouette against the lamplight.

"That you, Marion?" he called out, peering into the darkness. Then, almost instantly: "Somebody with you, Marion?"

Haig answered for her.

"Good evening, Cousin Seth!" he called out cheerily. "I just dropped in to ask about your health."

For perhaps as long as it took him to catch his arrested breath, Huntington stood motionless. Then, with an oath, he bounded back into the room, and disappeared, as Marion dully realized, in the direction of his room, where his revolver hung on a rack. She felt the form beside her straighten out like a loosed spring; and the next instant she was borne swiftly forward into the light, into the house, into the scene she had pictured, the scene she herself had prepared. The arm that supported her was quickly withdrawn, and she was left standing at one side of the door, while Haig leaped away from her, and stood waiting at the other.

Even as this was done, Huntington re-appeared at the door of his bedroom. The revolver in his right hand moved slowly upward. In the kitchen doorway was Claire — a stricken thing in blue and gold — clinging to the doorpost, her lips parted, her eyes wide with

terror. But Haig! Could anything have been more horrible than that smile? It was fearless, mocking, insolent. And his whole attitude matched it perfectly. He stood carelessly erect, with arms folded, disdaining Huntington's weapon. But not the slightest motion of his enemy — perhaps not even the thought before it — could have escaped him. Marion knew him; and she felt as certain as if it had already happened that if Seth lifted his revolver by so much as another inch he would be stretched out on the floor there as he had been on the ground at Paradise.

All this she saw in an interval as brief as that between two clicks of the shutter of her kodak. Then the clock on the mantel began to strike. It was a friendly clock, with a musical, soft note. But now its stroke crashed upon the silence like a tolling bell. It seemed to have its part in that halted scene, as if all waited on its last solemn count. If she could only move, think, speak, before it finished!

The next thing she knew she was in the middle of the room, directly between the two men, and speaking.

"Wait, Seth!" she heard herself saying. "I did it. I brought him here to — to make peace with you."

She ended on the clock's last note; and silence fell again. Huntington's jaw dropped; amazement was printed on his face, and incredulity. Marion walked quietly up to him, took the revolver from his hand, and left him standing in the doorway, his arms hanging loose at his side. She crossed the room to Haig, slowly, somewhat gropingly like a somnambulist, with a half-smiling, strange expression fixed on her chalk-white face. She stretched out her left hand to him, her right

still clasping Seth's six-shooter. There was something magnetic, curiously compelling in her manner; for she said nothing, made no sound. Haig stared at her, the odious smile fading from his lips; his arms slowly fell apart, one hand in the direction of the revolver at his hip; and for a moment it seemed that he too would yield to her. But suddenly he threw back his head, and laughed.

"By Jupiter . . ." he cried. "I didn't think it was in you. You almost got me too. Good night — all!"

On that he turned on his heel, and vanished into the night. Marion heard him laughing still as his boots crunched on the gravel; heard his voice in brief and sharp command at the stable; heard the beat of the sorrels' hoofs on the road, and the fragment of a song wafted back to her,— something rollicking and insolent, in a foreign tongue. She stood listening until the sounds had died away in the night, and silence enveloped her. Then, just as Huntington leaped forward with a bellow of rage,— too late, as ever,— and Claire, with a shriek, rushed to throw herself between him and the door, Marion's head drooped forward, her knees gave way, and she fell senseless on the floor.

Huntington's big revolver, slipping from her nerveless fingers as she fell, struck the Navajo rug with a muffled thump, bounced and rolled over, and settled down harmlessly on a patch of barbaric red.

CHAPTER IX

HEARTS INSURGENT

SETH recovered his revolver, and lunged toward the door. But Claire was before him. She flung herself upon him, clutching the lapels of his coat.

"Seth! Seth!" she shrieked. "What are you doing?"

"I'll follow him!" he roared. "I'll follow him! I'll end the whole thing! I'll finish it, I tell you!"

"No! No!" she wailed; and clung to him frantically.

He was beside himself, almost incoherent, for the moment quite irresponsible. It is very likely that, but for Claire, he would have mounted a horse and pursued Haig to his ranch, with such consequences as anybody except himself could easily have foreseen. But he was not so far gone in frenzy as to hurt Claire, as he must have done in tearing himself loose from her. He stood a moment in tragic helplessness, grinding his teeth, and hurling muttered imprecations out into the night that covered Philip Haig. Then he looked down at the golden head pressed against his breast, and felt the frail body quivering; and some sense of what he was doing, or was about to do, reached his brain through the fumes of rage. There was yet a long struggle; for he was too ponderous for quick decisions, and at the same time too outright for successful equivocation. Defeat was always a staggering blow to him, since he had no art to

mask it. And now, lacking the sagacity to swallow his mortification and to bide his time, he could only suffer, rending himself in lieu of another on whom to pour his fury.

In the midst of this futile passion his roving eyes fell on Marion. She lay where she had fallen, in a dead faint, limp on the red-and-yellow rug. Seth stared at her a full minute, while an indefinable suspicion grew in the back of his brain. She had said, "I've brought him here to make peace with you." And Haig himself had given the lie to that speech! What did it all mean? By God, he would find out!

"Come, Claire!" he said. "Attend to Marion!" And he began to loosen her fingers from his coat.

But she only clutched it the tighter.

"You'll go!" she cried.

"No! Not to-night!"

"You promise?"

"Yes! Yes!" he growled.

She looked steadily up at him, questioning, fearful, until he bent down and kissed her.

"There!" he said, roughly and yet not ungently. "Now go to Marion!"

They picked her up, and laid her on the couch at one side of the big room; and Claire unbuttoned her dress at the throat, and bathed her face and neck with cold water, while Seth rubbed and slapped her hands.

Her first impulse, on opening her eyes and seeing Claire and Seth leaning over her, was to raise her head, and look toward the door. She saw only a patch of darkness, empty and still. Then she remembered how she had heard his mocking voice fade away in the night;

and her eyes returned to Seth and Claire. Their faces told her what to expect; and she knew that they were right in demanding, as they would demand, the fullest explanation.

"Water, please!" she murmured, moistening her dry lips with her tongue.

She sat up, slowly emptied the glass that Claire placed in her trembling hand, then buttoned her collar over her bare throat, and began to pin up the locks of hair that had fallen about her face and neck. Her hands, she thought, were very thin and white. She had never fainted before, and was still a little frightened and surprised.

"What does it all mean, Marion?" demanded Huntington.

"Wait, Seth, can't you?" warned Claire. Then to Marion: "There's no hurry, dear. When you feel better."

But her eyes denied her words. There was indeed no way out of it. Marion must speak, and without delay.

"I'm cold," she said, shivering.

"Of course!" cried Claire. "Come to the fire. And Seth! Close the door, please!"

Huntington strode to the door, and slammed it shut. Then he returned to the chimney piece, and watched Marion as she leaned toward the blaze. He could barely restrain himself, waiting for her to begin.

"I've been a silly fool, I suppose," she said presently, sitting erect again, and facing her cousins courageously. "It was all my fault. You mustn't blame him."

An impatient exclamation by Huntington drew a warning glance from Claire.

"Tell us just what happened, dear!" she urged gently.

"I don't exactly know — I can't just understand how it happened," Marion began. "I had an accident — in the road. My foot was hurt — my ankle was twisted — or I thought it was — and I was frightened."

"An accident?" said Claire.

"I was off my pony — the cinches were loose — and — when I tried to mount again — I slipped — somehow — and fell. He was just in time to help me, and —"

"Where was that?" asked Huntington.

"Just below his place. He was coming back —"

"But what were you doing over there?" demanded Huntington.

"Riding," she said calmly, perhaps a little defiantly.

"Yes, I know that. But on his land?"

"Did you ever tell me anything about that?" she retorted.

"No, but —"

"Then how was I to know?"

"But you've heard —"

"Yes, I heard some things at the post-office. You've told me nothing."

Huntington's face reddened angrily.

"Never mind that now!" cried Claire sharply, sending another warning look at Seth. "Go on, dear!"

Marion went on, very carefully. With Claire alone she might have been more frank and confiding, but Seth's belligerent attitude had begun to stir resentment in her.

"He thought I had a bad sprain. He was annoyed;

he didn't take any pains to conceal that from me. But he lifted me into the saddle, and rode with me to his stable, and told one of his men to hitch up a team, and drive me home. That would have been — all right, and he had no intention — until — something I said — I must have been hysterical — something made him angry, and he — said he would drive me home himself."

"And you let him!" cried Claire reproachfully.

"No, I didn't *let* him. He did it in spite of all I could do. I pleaded with him, I tried every way to stop him. Once I started to leap out of the trap. But he caught me. He laughed at me. But he was very angry too; he scolded me dreadfully. Said I needed to be punished for — I don't know what. He hates women, and says we're always meddling in men's affairs. It served me right, of course. And please remember it was all my fault — truly!"

"Did he say anything about making peace?" asked Claire.

"No. That was all mine. I had to do something quickly. You know that."

"But what did he say about me?" growled Huntington, who was far from satisfied, and still suspicious.

"Not much. Oh, yes!" she added impulsively. "He said you and he could probably come to an understanding quickly enough if —"

She paused, embarrassed.

"If what?" demanded Huntington.

"That was only because he dislikes women, I think. He said — if Claire — Mrs. Huntington, he said,— would let you alone."

"I?" cried Claire. It was almost a scream of astonishment and indignation.

"I'll show him!" shouted Huntington. "He'd better keep her name out of it, or I'll —"

"I haven't done anything!" wailed Claire.

"I'll make him pay for that!" bellowed Huntington, bringing his fist down on the mantel.

"You mustn't blame him!" protested Marion hastily. "He was angry at me, and I don't think he's as bad as you think he is."

"Marion!" cried Claire, her eyes widening with wonder.

Then Marion had the misfortune to blush under Claire's curious gaze. She blushed, at first, merely because she had gone too far in her effort to clear Haig of responsibility for what had occurred that evening; and then the blood stormed into her cheeks as she encountered Claire's look, and attached a deeper meaning to it than it actually conveyed.

Huntington leaned forward, and gazed suspiciously into Marion's crimsoned face.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he broke out. "You'd think the girl was in love with this ruffian!"

For an instant there was a silence much like the silence that follows a clap of thunder. Then Marion rose slowly to her feet, quivering, her eyes ablaze.

"Ruffian?" she cried. "If there's any ruffian it's —"

She caught herself. She was innately gentle and fastidious, and she could not, without shame, have forced her lips to say the things that she felt in her outraged heart. But she looked at him; and under that

look Seth quailed and shrank. What had he said to evoke this luminous hatred? He had not meant —

"And I think she's right, Seth Huntington!" exclaimed Claire, coming to Marion, and putting an arm around her. "If there's any ruffian it's you, and I'm ashamed of you!"

Huntington's jaw dropped, and he stared at them, his eyes bulging with astonishment. Then suddenly he turned, and bolted from the room. The door leading to the kitchen was flung shut behind him; then the outer door banged; and in a moment his heavy footsteps were heard on the veranda, where he strode to and fro in helpless rage and shame and wonder. He had a feeling of soreness over all his body, as if some one had roundly pummelled him; his face itched beneath his beard; he could not find a comfortable place for his hands. Well, he agreed with Haig about one thing: women were hell! And here was Claire siding with Marion against him; calling him a ruffian! Was he a ruffian? What had he said to merit that? Couldn't they take a joke? But this casuistry did not go down, though he tried to hammer it down with many violent gestures. He began to have certain qualms that he recognized as premonitory signs of weakening; and he struggled to bolster up his anger. Damn Haig! If he had only finished him that day in the timber, when the others had wanted to! But this was a vain regret. There remained the present situation. Gradually his steps faltered. He stopped often to look vacantly at the stars. They had nothing to say to him. He felt very solitary, alone in the world.

After a time the kitchen door was opened softly.

"Seth!" came a whisper from that direction.

"Well?" he answered uncertainly.

"Aren't you cold?"

"No."

"Well, we are. The fire's going out."

"Umph!"

"Won't you please fetch some wood?"

No reply. Claire slipped out, and crept up to him.

"Come!" she commanded softly. "Do you want us to freeze?"

Still no reply.

"Oh, you do, do you?"

"It's time you went to bed."

"No, it isn't. We're not going to bed until you come in and beg Marion's pardon."

"No, I'll be —"

She tried to clap her hand over his mouth, but succeeded only in hitting his nose a smart tap, which was just as effective, since it checked him.

"No swearing, either!" she went on. "You've been rude enough for one night, don't you think? I'll tell you my opinion of it later. She's going to be easy with you because she's sorry about it all. Come!"

Huntington did not move, or answer her.

"Do you want her to leave by the next stage — and have this all over the Park too — like Haig's visit? Come!"

He groaned, but followed her. At the door of the living room he caught sight of Marion seated before the fireplace, where only embers glowed dull red.

"I'll get some wood," he said quickly, glad of even a few minutes' grace.

Fortune tossed him a small favor: the wood bin near the kitchen door was empty — almost. Another time that would have brought a storm down on the head of the unlucky stable hand whose duty it was to keep the bin filled. But now Seth rejoiced at having to go to the wood yard, and found it much too near.

He re-entered the house with an armload of sticks, and placed them carefully on the embers; stirred up the glowing mass with a poker; readjusted the fresh wood; provoked the red coals once more; and at last, having exhausted the dilatory possibilities of the fire, stood up clumsily to face the ordeal.

"Well, Marion," he began awkwardly, "I'm in for it, I reckon."

She did not reply; she only looked at him. There were dark shadows around her eyes that heightened the pallor of her cheeks; but the eyes themselves were clear and piercing, and as cold now as they had been fiery before. For once in his life Huntington was conscious of his bulk; he felt conspicuous; and the wound in his shoulder, almost healed, began to itch and ache.— There were worse things than being shot.— If she would only turn those eyes away from him! And then it dawned upon him that she was waiting.

"I beg your pardon, Marion!" he stammered. "I was ugly. I didn't really mean — I hope you'll forgive me."

For a minute longer she let him stew in his kettle, then lifted him out scrupulously, at the end of a very long fork, and dropped him steaming, as if he had been a lump of unsavory fat.

"Yes, I forgive you," she said, very, very distantly. "You probably weren't thinking."

If that was forgiveness! But he did not know — even Claire did not know then — how deeply he had wounded Marion with his rude and accusing speech,— as if he had called a jeering crowd to look at the little flower that blooms but once, and very secretly, in a woman's heart. Forgive him? She never would forgive him for that blundering outburst, which was indeed the more unforgivable because he did not seriously mean, and certainly did not believe, the thing he said.

"Thank you, Marion dear!" said Claire softly.

At that Marion suddenly rushed to Claire, and knelt by her chair. She had her own faults to be forgiven.

"I've been very foolish!" she cried. "I've caused you pain and humiliation. I'm sorry. Please forgive me!"

So they cried it out in each other's arms, while Huntington rolled a cigarette, took one whiff of it, and tossed it into the fire. It required a stronger narcotic than tobacco to soothe his fevered spirits. After a while he whirled around and faced the two women.

"See here, Marion!" he said. "It's all our fault for not telling you about Haig. But we didn't want to annoy you with our troubles, and we never imagined you'd stumble on to him. Do you know now what this is all about?"

She spared him the answer that she had heard something on that point the day of the shooting.

"No; that is, very little."

"Well, it's just this: Before he came here we were all playing the game peacefully together. Each of us

had just about enough land, with the cut hay and the winter pastures, to pull through the winter, and there was just enough free grazing up in the edges of the timber to keep the cattle going through the summer and early fall."

"That was government land," explained Claire.

"And open to all of us," added Seth. "We never had any dispute with the Englishman who owned Haig's ranch before him, and he got fair treatment, though he wasn't here much of the time to look after it. We heard he had some family trouble, and one day when he'd been gone a long time —"

"That's four years now," interrupted Claire.

"Yes. Haig showed up, and said the ranch was his. He started in straight off to hog the whole thing. Bought a thousand head of cattle — that made thirteen hundred head — almost as many as all the rest of us had put together. He turned the thirteen hundred into the open range, and hired men to keep them moving the right way for the good feed, and —"

"He had a perfect right to do that, you see," Claire put in hastily.

"Legal right, maybe," Huntington went on. "But he didn't have any real right to more than his share. We organized, bunched our cattle, and stayed with 'em. That way we were stronger than he, and soon had his cattle starving. Then he disappeared, and we didn't see anything of him for three weeks. And what do you suppose the damned skunk —"

"Seth!" cried Claire warningly, with an anxious look at Marion.

Marion merely shook her head.

"Well, he fooled us. He went to Denver, got a lawyer on the job, looked up the records, found there'd been a mistake in the surveys, and came back to us with a government deed to almost half the forest reserve that we'd been using as free pasture. Then he ordered us off, and we went, with six Winchesters pointed at our fool backs. What do you think of that, Marion?"

"But why?" asked Marion. "I mean what was his motive in all that? He isn't a cattleman. I mean — I don't think he cares enough —"

She stopped, finding herself in dangerous waters.

"Why? Because he's a —" Huntington checked himself. "Anyhow, he barely escaped a lynching that night. And if he only knew it, I'm the one that stopped it. I said we'd find some other way. But we haven't found it. We had to bring most of our stock down to the pastures we needed for winter, and in winter we had to buy hay at eighteen dollars a ton. And Haig had hay to sell. Three of our men were driven out of business. Tom Jenkins, being dead broke and discouraged, with a family, killed himself. I had to sell off a third of my cattle, and twenty head disappeared, and I never saw them again. And maybe you can understand now how I felt when I saw him this evening, standing there in my own house, grinning at me. God!"

He turned, grabbed up the poker, and began jabbing viciously at the fire.

Yes, Marion could understand that, but — She was not satisfied. There was something missing from Seth's narrative. Haig's accusations that day at the post-office — his missing cattle, and the cut wires at the Forbidden

Pasture — And if all that Seth had said was true, which she doubted, the mystery was only deepened. She was sure that Haig was only playing a part, that he was not a cattleman by choice, and that his heart was not in the game, whatever it was. She wanted to ask questions, but refrained, lest she should again arouse Seth's suspicions. She would see Smythe.

CHAPTER X

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

THE next afternoon Huntington, with painful diffidence, yet anxious to come to some sort of terms with Marion, proposed that she should begin her shooting lessons. She acquiesced in a manner that relieved him immensely, for she, on her side, was sorely in need of distraction. So they were presently on the hillside behind the ranch house with the rifles,— Seth's Winchester and the little Savage he had bought for Claire, who, to his great disappointment, did not like guns, and never could be taught to see the sights with one eye closed. His delight, therefore, was unbounded when Marion took to the Savage with almost the quick adaptability of a man. True, her first shots went high and wild among the foliage, but she was fast getting the grip of the gun, and had actually once scraped the bark of the tree on which the target of white paper was tacked, when they were hailed by a cheerful voice demanding permission for an unarmed and perfectly harmless man to approach.

"Smythe!" growled Huntington, resenting the interruption. Then aloud, as heartily as he could: "Hello, Smythe! You're quite safe."

"What's going on here, anyhow?" asked Smythe.

"Where are your boasted powers of observation?" retorted Marion.

"It's more polite to ask."

"In Paradise Park?" she queried, in a tone of mild surprise.

Seth's face reddened as he stooped over a half-empty cartridge-box. He had congratulated himself too soon. But while Smythe and Marion exchanged more badinage he refilled the magazine of the Savage, and held it ready.

"Will you have another try?" he asked.

"Yes, please, if Mr. Smythe will only keep still. I know I can never hit anything if he talks."

"I'm mum!" he answered.

The first shot went wild. So, indeed, the second and third.

"There! What did I tell you?" cried Marion petulantly.

"But I didn't say a word!" protested Smythe.

"What were you thinking, then?"

"What a charming Diana —"

"Don't think any more, please!"

'But I can't stop thinking!"

"In that case you'd better talk. You certainly talk enough without thinking."

"Bull's-eye!" he cried joyously. "Now try again!"

"I suppose I must learn not to be bothered."

She pressed her lips together, and steadied herself resolutely. She would show him! The next shot cut a furrow in the bark of the pine; the second struck within two inches of the target; and the third pinked the edge of the paper itself.

"That will do for this time," she said, in some elation, as she handed the gun to Huntington.

"To-morrow you'll do better," he assured her. "And then we'll try it at longer range."

He began to pick up the cartridge boxes and his own rifle.

"You're not riding to-day?" said Smythe.

"How did you guess it?" she demanded, laughing.

"Oh, a truce! A truce!" he pleaded. "I mean, if you are not going for a ride, will you walk up the hill there?"

He pointed toward the pines.

"Why?"

"To please me," he answered.

But she caught a look in his eyes that decided her.

"Certainly, if you are so easily pleased."

"Oh, I'm a very Lazarus at the table of life!" he retorted gaily. "Every crumb comforts me."

She laughed, and stepped away with him among the rocks, while Huntington, still swearing at Smythe for a meddling fool, strode down the hill.

Marion surmised that Smythe had something to say to her. Had he heard already? Had the news of yesterday's comedy, that was so near a tragedy, already spread far and wide over the Park? But that was scarcely possible, since Haig's men would be silent, and Seth had kept Williams too busy all day for gossip.

They climbed the rocky slope without more words, clambering over bowlders and fallen tree trunks, until they reached the summit of the hill, and flung themselves down, hot and panting, on a great flat rock that commanded a sweeping view of the Park. At one side more hills rose, small mountains in themselves, thickly

wooded, with white peaks towering behind. On the other, the valley of the Brightwater lay green and bronze in the sun, with the white stream curling and curving among the meadows. Far across the valley, beyond the ridge that divided the Park in unequal halves — that fateful ridge! — the western range of mountains glittered, dazzling white.

Marion's eyes at once sought out Thunder Mountain. What would it say to her to-day? Storm! Its top was half-hidden in a gray-black swirl of clouds, though the sun was bright on the snow-clad peaks around it.

"What do you see?" asked Smythe, as soon as his lungs would consent to speech.

"My mountain," she answered, without turning her head.

"Which is that?"

"Thunder Mountain."

"Umph! You're welcome to it!"

She was silent.

"Why your mountain?" he asked presently.

"I don't know."

"But there must be a reason — or something."

"That's just it — something. It's hideous, but it fascinates me. I can't help thinking that —"

"That what?"

"I don't know."

They laughed together.

"It's got a bad reputation," said Smythe.

"Perhaps that's the reason."

Then she was embarrassed, thinking unexpectedly of another bad reputation in the Park.

"Perhaps," he answered, smiling at the back of her head, where the tawny hair curved up adorably from the soft, white neck.

"Tell me about it!" she said at length.

"It's a death trap."

"You mean — men have gone up there?"

"Oh, yes!"

"How?"

"There's a trail, what's left of it. The Warpath, they call it."

"The Warpath?"

"Yes. It was first a war trail, when fighting tribes lived in these mountains. But even the Indians didn't use it often — only in midsummer. It's a trail over bare rocks, marked by stones set up at long intervals. The Indians didn't mark it. They had their own ways of knowing it. But after the Indians came trappers, hunters, prospectors, and some of them set up the stones. It would be a valuable short cut between the Park and the San Luis country, if it were safe. But it's not. I'm told that many lives have been lost on it. I can't find details except of one tragedy. Some ten years ago a party of English people, guests at the ranch that Haig now owns, went on a pleasure trip to Thunder Mountain. They meant to go only as far as timber line. It's not difficult as far as the foot of the scarp that lifts to the flat top you see yonder. It's done on horseback to that point — and across too, if you care to try it. But on top — that's another matter. It isn't the mountain itself that gets you. It's the storm. The English party ventured on top, and three of them never came back. The wind hurled them into a chasm,

and their bodies were never recovered. That's enough for me, thank you!"

"Has nobody in the Park ever been across?" Marion persisted.

"Old Parker — Jim Parker's father — crossed it once, many years ago. But he came back another way, around by Tellurium. Young Parker has been as far as the Devil's Chair. That's the top of the notch where the wind sucks you into it — unless, by good chance, it blows you away from it."

"And no one else?" Marion insisted, breathless.

"One other man has gone to the Twin Sisters. That's halfway over."

"Who was that?" she asked; as if she did not know.

"He balked at the women, you see."

Smythe chuckled.

"The Twin Sisters," Smythe went on, "are two huge gray rocks, I'm told, vaguely resembling carved figures. The trail passes between them. There's no other possible way, and when the wind is blowing it shoots out between them like water from a fire-hose. Haig was caught just there by a storm. He came back fighting mad, and swore he'd cross Thunder Mountain yet, or die there. But that reminds me. I've got news for you."

"News?" asked Marion, with a start.

Her first thought was of Sunnysides. Had Haig decided not to wait for Farrish? But no! It would be something about yesterday's sensation.

"It keeps well, I see," she said lightly.

"I didn't want to excite you so soon after that long climb."

"Thank you! If you think I can't stand it you just keep it to yourself — if you can!"

"But I came expressly to tell you."

"Then why don't you expressly tell me? Don't be exasperating, Mr. Smythe!"

He grinned exultantly.

"Well," he said, "I've been eavesdropping."

"What?"

"Not intentionally. Pure accident. But I didn't stick my fingers in my ears."

"No, I can understand that."

"Thanks. It was this way: I was fishing — for fish, really. Under a clump of willows, just where the road from Haig's joins the main valley road. You know?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Haig and another man, Higgins, it turned out to be — he's a Denver lawyer — with his family for an outing down at Cobalt Lake. It appeared he'd been up to see Haig partly on business and partly just for a friendly visit. They separated there, after a little conversation.

"'It's strange you've never heard a word from him,' said Higgins.

"'Four years,' answered Haig.

"'He's probably off in South Africa somewhere.'

"'Or India. It's a long trail he followed, no doubt.'

"'You can only wait, I suppose,' Higgins said.

"'Well, I've nothing else to do,' Haig replied, with a laugh.'" Smythe paused.

"That's something to think about," he said musingly. "Who is this 'he'? And why is Haig waiting for

him? Well, that was all I heard about that. Higgins next asked Haig if he wouldn't please change his mind about riding down to see them.

"'No,' Haig answered. 'I never go anywhere. I'm not very sociable, no longer a gregarious creature. Ask my neighbors about that!'

"'Oh, hang your neighbors! This is different. We're not living here, and we can't pester you. But you see I got Hail Columbia from my wife for not bringing you to see her in Denver, and she's dead set on getting acquainted with you here. She says you're the most unselfish man in the world. I'd be jealous if —'

"'Oh, come now!' protested Haig, laughing.

"'It's true. So you'll drop this hermit business for once, won't you? It will give my wife much pleasure.'

"There was a little silence.

"'Well, have your own way,' said Haig at last 'I suppose a man's got to humor his lawyer, if he doesn't want to lose a plain case some day. But I warn you. I'm not very amusing, that is, I trust not.'

"'Good!' cried Higgins. 'We'll not keep you long. The day after to-morrow, shall we say? Right! Now good-by! And don't let Huntington pot you — before you've seen Mrs. Higgins.'

"They both laughed at that. Higgins drove off down the valley in his road wagon, and Haig galloped toward home. And then I found a trout had run away with my hook. Big fellow too, and clever as Satan. Scuttled away under a rock and worked loose before I could get after him. But it was a good day's fishing just the same, don't you think?"

She did not reply at once; and Smythe discreetly

busied himself tossing stones at an impertinent chi
munk that popped in and out among the rocks a
fallen limbs.

"Have you seen this Mrs. Higgins?" asked Mari
suddenly.

"No," Smythe answered gravely, though his ey
twinkled wickedly. "But Higgins is sixty at least, a
I fancy his wife's too old to be—" A warning lo
checked him. But really, Miss Gaylord, you oug
not to jump down my throat after I've brought you su
an interesting knot for your pretty hands to untie."

She laughed at his lugubrious countenance, then sto
up, and reached out a hand to him, letting him hold
for just a breath of time.

"No, you're a good friend. I know it."

"I'm not very deep," he said, with a touch of deje
tion. "Nobody ever takes me very seriously. But
hope you'll trust me!"

"Indeed I will! But come! We must go back."

So they went slipping and sliding down the hil
digging their heels into the ground, clinging to rock
and trees to check their swift descent, laughing at thei
wild plunges and gyrations. At the house, when the
had rested a while on the veranda, Marion dismisse
Smythe as quickly as she could without abruptness; an
when he had gone she hastened to her room, and locke
the door, and flung herself down on the bed, with he
hands clasped behind her head, to stare up at the ceilin
in a whirl of thoughts. There was a mystery! There
was a motive behind Haig's conduct! "The most un
selfish man in the world!" And she repeated the word
over and over again, and gathered them to her heart.

CHAPTER XI

AVALANCHE

HUNTINGTON soon had his revenge on Marion, though, in his blindness, he never knew it. She and Claire, after an unusually protracted Small Talk the night before, arose late one morning to find the house topsy-turvy from masculine activity. On the veranda they discovered Seth cleaning rifles, surrounded by cartridge boxes, hunting knives, canvas bags and wrappings, rubber coats, leather straps, fishing tackle and what not.

"In the name of goodness, Seth Huntington! What are you doing?" shrilled Claire.

"Guess!" replied Huntington, with a rather heavy attempt at tantalizing.

"Oh, I know! Camping. But you don't mean to-day?"

"Sure!"

"But why didn't you ask us?" demanded Claire. "Maybe we don't choose —"

"But you do, though. I promised Marion that as soon as I —"

He stopped, for even his habitually veiled eyes could not miss the look of consternation on Marion's face.

"Why — I thought —" he began uncertainly. "Of course, if you don't want to go —"

The oiled rag dropped from his hand. His descent

from elation (he had planned a little surprise) to dejection and chagrin was a tumble that touched Marion's commiseration and disarmed her. She did not want to go camping; she did not want to leave the Park for even a day, an hour; she did not want to miss any opportunity to see Haig. More than ever now was she determined to solve his mystery. So Huntington's "surprise" was a greater shock to her than he, simple man, could possibly have foreseen or perceived. But even if she had not been moved by his rather ludicrous disappointment she would not have dared to refuse acquiescence in his programme. She had indeed expressed an ardent — oh, too ardent! — desire to go camping, and any explanation she could think of on the instant would have led her into regions where she could not trust herself.

"Indeed, I want to go!" she cried quickly, though there was a big lump in her throat. "You took me by surprise, that's all."

"I should say so!" said Claire. "Think you're smart, don't you? We might have been all dressed for it if you'd only told us. When do we start, Big Boss?"

Huntington recovered his good spirits quickly, assured that he had succeeded after all.

"I thought we'd ride to Ely's to-day, sleep there to-night, and make Mount Avalanche to-morrow evening."

"Then we must hurry," said Claire. "Come, Marion."

"How long — shall we be gone?" asked Marion, struggling to appear enthusiastic.

"Four or five days, I suppose."

Her heart sank. She could have cried with vexation. But she managed to conceal her real feelings in

the bustle of preparation. There were provisions to be packed: cans and jars and bottles; bacon and ham and flour against the possible event of bad luck with the guns and rods; warm clothes and bedding; medicines and bandages. So fully occupied were her hands and brain with these details, and later with her first real experience with the mountain trails, that her heart must perforce keep its peace until some hour of solitude.

Toward five o'clock of the second day they reached their destination,— a grassy shelf a little below timber line on Mount Avalanche. There, in some past age, an avalanche of titanic proportions had carried away part of the mountain itself; and they camped now on the top of the débris, long since concealed by a dense forest growth, as if nature had employed her utmost arts to hide the wound. Marion could not but yield a little to emotions of delight and wonder. On that high platform she stood above a marvelous mountain world, below another mountain world as marvelous. Behind her Avalanche reared sheer and sharp and white against the sky. On either side were snow-clad peaks. At her feet were forests in solid masses of green, now darkening in the twilight. And beyond, far, far beyond, the Park they had left lay bright under the sun's after-glow, with a background of range on range of mountains in their violet haze. On the shelf was forage for the horses; near at hand were moss and balsam for their beds; and at a little distance a rivulet, ice-cold, [illegible] shady pools where small trout awaited capture. And the air was like dry wine on the lips, with a tang of resin in the nostrils; and the woods sang a song that even Marion could not resist.

Here they pitched two tents just large enough to cover the beds of balsam boughs and moss and blankets. In the three days they passed in camp Marion learned many things that were to be of incalculable value to her one day, though she never could have guessed that all this too, like the encounter in the Forbidden Pasture, had been ordered in the Beginning, details in the Scheme of Things. She learned surprising secrets of makeshift cookery; she learned the Indian's lesson of a very little fire; she learned the mountaineer's economy of matches and like precious articles. She fished in the small pools that lay hidden away in dark recesses of the forest, practised shooting with her rifle, and on the third day, in the timber below the camp, with Seth at her side, brought down her first deer.

"I told you!" cried Huntington, delighted at the progress of his pupil.

But her heart was not in all this; it was clamoring now to be heard, and would by no means be stilled. Each evening Marion walked apart from the others, to stand at the edge of the lofty platform, and watch her green and violet Elysium swallowed up in night. Each morning she searched for it through her field glasses to assure herself that it had not vanished in the dark. And when the last day of their outing came, the last evening, the last night, she could scarce contain her impatience. To-morrow they would start; and the day after —

She could not sleep that night. Every twig and every needle of her pine mattress seemed to have conspired to torture her. She tossed about until she could no longer endure her bed; and in the middle of the night

she crept out of the tent, and sat, wrapped in a blanket, before the smouldering embers of the fire. The hobbled horses grazed not far away; a night bird twitted solitarily in the brush; and from the depths of the forest came the scream of some savage creature out on its kill. Against the star-crowded sky the peaks stood up cold and impassive. What cared they? What did the world care? What did Philip care?

For now she knew that she loved him. Yes, yes, she loved him! In her heart she had known it from the beginning, since that meeting in the Forbidden Pasture, had known it as one knows things without acknowledgment. Her mind had acknowledged only the hundred reasons why she should not, could not love him. He had repelled her; he had not veiled his meaning, had not concealed his antagonism; he had told her plainly, brutally almost that he would not endure her presence, that she must avoid his side of the Park.

Then she thought of Robert,— Robert, so devoted and so true. What was she doing: throwing away his love that was so unselfishly, so whole-heartedly laid at her feet? Had she been mad to flee from him? Yes, mad! Pride rose to support the fondness and the admiration she had felt for him. And so there ensued a struggle between the two fine spirits that dwelt in her, — the proud little lady of the Fragonard and the Viking with red hair.

The Viking won. Had not her father said to her, in those long talks about her mother, that love is the only thing? And back she came, on swiftest wings of passion, to Philip; and she was glad. She knew now the meaning of her restlessness in the dark days in the

unheeding city; she knew whose voice had called, whose arms had held her, though he was unaware. He needed her, though he did not know it. And she had come to him, without understanding. Somewhere she had read a fugitive bit of verse that had meant nothing then, and had been forgotten until now, when it suddenly sang across the years and the spaces like a call to courage:

"The wild wind bloweth
The cross of fire.
The wild heart knoweth
Its own desire."

The wild heart knoweth its own desire! She rose to her feet with a singing and a resurrection of her heart. She scarcely knew that her limbs were stiff and that her body ached with cold. Her spirit was aroused. She could not go and take Philip as her father had taken the one he loved. But there were ways; when had a woman ever failed, in love, of finding them? She set herself to thinking, planning, scheming, while she walked swiftly to and fro before the tents. And presently she stopped her pacing, and looked curiously around her. There had come a subtle alteration in the aspect of the night. A shivering freshness had crept insensibly into the air. Leaves and grass and the very air appeared to be astir, though the silence and the darkness were as before. She looked up eagerly at the sky, and saw that the stars were pale. It was not yet the dawn; it was only the passing of the night. But the dawn was near. The dawn! The dawn!

She did not wish Seth to find her there. He would ask questions, staring at her. She crept stealthily back

into her tent, and lay there, shaking with cold, to wait for the noise that Huntington would make as he sought for live embers in the ashes of the fire.

Once out of the mountains and in the foothills, she rode far ahead of Seth and Claire, impatient at the slow progress necessitated by the difficulties of the pack horses. Late in the afternoon she found herself at a fork of the road with which she was familiar. A little way up the less-used of the two branches there was a glade where columbines grew in extraordinary profusion. She had gathered armloads of them there, and seemed scarcely to have touched the edge of that wild garden where nature had been seized with a prodigal impulse. And now, rather to be doing something than to await in irritation for Seth and Claire, she turned her pony's head and rode toward the glade. In five minutes she was fording a little stream, beyond which the road rose slightly to cross the shoulder of a hill, and dipped again to run in a sharp curve along the margin of the glade. She took the rise at a gallop, sped down the other slope, and at the curve of the road reined up her horse with a startled cry. She had come suddenly upon a team hitched at the side of the road,— the sorrels and the trap in which Philip Haig had driven her to Huntington's that terrible evening.

For a moment she was bereft of thought and feeling. At that very instant she had been thinking of him; what instant was she not thinking of him? But the utterly unexpected encounter — for he was there somewhere, in the glade, no doubt — swept away all that courage she had found on Avalanche. She felt suddenly helpless,

inert, afraid; and before she could regain her self-possession, call back her high resolve, the bushes at the roadside parted, and Philip stood before her. He bore a great bouquet of columbines, their stems wrapped in damp moss and leaves and tied securely with a string. At sight of her he halted; and that look of annoyance she had seen him wear in the road below his ranch house came again into his pale face. For some seconds they regarded each other in silence.

"True," he said at length, with a smile that tortured her, "this is not my side of the Ridge. I am the trespasser, even though this is public domain. You have as much right here as I — more, since I said the Ridge was the dividing line. So —"

He stepped quickly to her horse's side, pressed the great bunch of pale-blue flowers into her limp but obedient hands, lifted his battered hat, turned on his heel, walked directly to the trap, leaped into the seat, and drove swiftly away. She watched him dully until he was out of sight behind a bend in the road, among the trees; watched the spot where he had disappeared until it became a blur to her aching eyes. Then she looked slowly down at the flowers in her hands. Columbines! Frail, lovely things, the fairest product, she had thought, of nature's laboratory, reflecting the infinite, ineffable blue of God's skies, delicate as the flower that had bloomed with such wonderful, unexpected beauty in her own heart! How she could have treasured them, wept over them, hugged them to her breast, if he had given them to her in another way. Slowly her fingers relaxed. The flowers fell into the dust of the road. She stared down at them a moment; and then, with a cry, leaped

from her horse, picked them up eagerly, clasped them to her breast, buried her face in them, and watered them with her tears.

Seth said he guessed he would ride down to the post-office before supper; yesterday was mail day; might be something. Marion was glad of his departure, and to avoid Claire was not difficult, considering what baths, and changing of linen, and brushing of hair they required after their outing. Refreshed and rested, they had scarcely met before the new-lighted fire at twilight when Seth returned, stamping vigorously into the room.

"You're the lucky one, Marion," he said.

He fumbled in his pockets, and finally produced a letter. She took it, glanced at it, and let it fall into her lap. A great stillness seemed to have come upon the world. She appeared to be looking at Seth and Claire across great distances. She could hear her heart pounding in her bosom like something that hammered for freedom. Ages seemed to have passed before she was able to rise slowly, to smile, to beg to be excused a moment. In her room she stood quite still, mechanically tore open the envelope, and read:

Dear Marion: You told me not to write, and I have obeyed till now. Don't scold, please! You see I am in Denver. It's business. Honest! A mining deal, just for a flyer. It may mean millions or nothing. I am here for several days, possibly weeks. Won't you *please* let me run up to see you? Don't say no, Marion. I promise to be good. I have an auto here, and they tell me the roads are O. K. at this season. I'll come away the minute you tell me to. If I can see you only for an hour it will make me very happy.

Yours always,

ROBERT.

She read it twice, while the color slowly returned to her cheeks. Then the letter faded from her sight, and she saw a face that wore a cruel smile, and heard a voice that bade her begone. And suddenly a wave of resentment, of anger, swept over her. To have been scorned, flouted, humiliated by one to whom — And here was a man who wanted her as he wanted nothing else in the world, who would toil for her, die for her, who would treasure every word and smile she should consent to give him, whose one desire was to make her happy. What madness had come over her that she — she the Viking's daughter — Her eyes were drawn, she knew not how, to the columbines that she had carefully, tenderly arranged in a bowl on her dressing table. In a passion she rushed upon them, snatched them up dripping, bore them to the open window, and flung them with all her strength out upon the lawn. A moment she stood looking at them, her hands clutched upon her heaving breast, her whole body quivering with the storm that raged within her. Then she whirled around, flung herself down at her little writing table, and wrote:

Dear Robert: Yes, come. MARION.

Her hand trembled now so that she could scarcely address the envelope, and seal it. But it was done at last. She rose, and paused a moment to collect herself. Her mouth was dry, her forehead was hot under the hand that she pressed upon it. Nervously she poured a glass of water from the crystal pitcher that stood on a little table by the window, and gulped it down. Her eyes, as she did so, fell again upon the bouquet of columbines lying forlorn, their tender faces half buried in the dry

grass. A cry rose to her lips, but she forced it back, and with a tightening of her lips, turned and went rapidly out into the room where Seth and Claire awaited her.

"What do you think?" she cried, in a voice that sounded strangely shrill and unmusical in her ears. "It's from Robert — Robert Hillyer — Papa's good friend — and mine. He wants to come up and see me — he's in Denver — on business. He wants to come up — he says — just for a day or two — do you mind — if I ask him?"

"Of course, dear!" cried Claire, with enthusiasm.

"Sure!" seconded Seth. "Tell him he's very welcome."

"I knew you'd say that!" said Marion excitedly. "So — the letter — it's all ready. Can it go out — the stage goes to-morrow, doesn't it?"

"Yes," replied Huntington. "I'll take it down in the morning — before you're up."

"Please!"

She stood a moment, smiling at them. Then her eyes wandered aimlessly around the room. She must do something quick, or she would go to pieces. She saw the piano, and fairly ran to it. Crash! went the chords. Rippling and tumbling on one another came the notes under her nervous fingers. Out of the jumble of unrelated sounds presently emerged a gay and sparkling melody; and then a gayer one; and after that a rollicking song from one of the latest musical comedies. There followed two of the sauciest, most irresponsible tunes that ever made a vaudeville success. She played with abandon, a kind of reckless fury, sitting erect, with

her head flung back, an insouciant smile flickering about her lips, her lithe body swaying with the music. Then suddenly, in the midst of a tune, she stopped, arose, faced Seth and Claire with flaming cheeks and eyes unnaturally bright.

"Great, Marion!" cried Seth, slapping his thigh. "Go on, please!"

But Claire had seen what Huntington had not. She turned to him swiftly, with a quick command, as if she had suddenly remembered something.

"I've clean forgot that pie, Seth. Go to the cave and bring me some apples. Quick, now!"

He sensed something a little queer in that order, which would have been very natural and pleasing at any other time, but he did not stop to question. Claire waited until the door had closed behind him, then ran to Marion, with anxiety pictured in her face.

"What is it, Marion?" she exclaimed.

"Oh, Claire. Claire!" cried Marion, breaking. "I'm so — so — unhappy!"

Then she flung herself into Claire's arms, weeping without restraint.

CHAPTER XII

SUNNYSIDES

MARION was not alone in her misery; but knowledge of this had it by any chance come to her, would not have eased her heart, though it might indeed have hardened it a little against more suffering to come.

Toward bedtime of the eighth day after that encounter at the glade of the columbines, Philip Haig sat stiffly silent in his armchair, staring into the fire. His brow was dark with discontent, his cheeks had paled with the slow ebbing of the tide of passion that had swept over him. It had begun to rise, though he was not then aware of it, or barely aware of it, the day Marion had halted him in the road below his ranch house; it had reached its flood as he drove away from her and left the bouquet of columbines in her limp hands.

Who was this girl? And why had she come to torture him? To him she now appeared as the incarnation of his tragedy. In her the Past, from which he had fled to the far corners of the earth, hiding his trail in seas and deserts and in stagnant backwaters of humanity, had tracked him down at last. And all the grief and bitterness and hatred that he had beaten down, or thought he had beaten down, had returned to rend and tear him.

Two beings he had loved, and to them he had given, to each in a different way, all his heart and soul and mind: his father and — that other. She had come to him at his most susceptible age, when, devoted only to art, he knew nothing of the world — a green boy, the wise ones had called him. She had come to him with all the surprise and wonder of a revelation, a coronation, a fulfillment, a golden epiphany. He had attributed to her such spiritual perfections as should have gone with her beauty and her grace; worshipped her for all that she was not and all that he was himself. And she had deceived him, exploited him, plundered him,— and laughed at him when by chance, one tragic, intolerable night, he found her out. And the next morning, as if his cup were not already full, he had received a cablegram, in his attic studio in Paris, telling him that his father had killed himself in a moment of despair over financial difficulties. So he had killed his father with his excessive demands for money to squander on 'Tonite. To be sure, he did not know — had had no hint from home — had never guessed that his father was in trouble. Nevertheless he had killed him — rather, she had killed him. What a fool he had been! Never such another fool since God placed man and woman together in one world. Cursing himself and her, and in her cursing all her sex, he fled — he knew not where. So stunned and dazed he was that he never really came to himself, found himself, until one day he awoke in Hong Kong.

That was the beginning of the new life, if such it might be called. He became a wanderer, an adventurer, seeking always new faces, new places, new experiences,

trying always to forget, hoping always for a blessed knock on the head in some mad undertaking, for a thin knife in the back in some wild adventure. But in all his wanderings the one kind of adventure that he refused, the one excitement that he steadfastly shunned, was the one that, because of his very aloofness, and of something that women ever saw in his eyes, was offered to him the most freely, in every land beneath the sun.

Slim Jim entered, bringing whisky and hot water. Haig turned his head to look at him. Jim never changed, whatever his environment; he was always the Orient, the inscrutable East. And now, slipping in so stealthily, he seemed to bring with him an atmosphere, an odor, a call, and Haig, still looking at Jim, but scarcely seeing him, began to murmur lines that intoxicated him:

"I know not where the white road runs, nor what the blue hills are,
But man can have the sun for friend, and for his guide a star;
And there's no end of voyaging when once the voice is heard,
For the river calls and the road calls, and —"

He stopped and sat suddenly erect.

"Jim!" he cried. "Do you remember the night we took old Kwang's girl away from the river rats in Tien-Tsin?"

"Vellee well," answered the Chinaman.

His face was expressionless; he concealed the joy that this mood of his master aroused in his thin breast. Jim did not like the Park, and only the recollection of one

day when he had stood tied to a capstan on a pirate junk, with a dozen fiends around him trying to make him tell something he did not know, and Haig had suddenly descended upon them like the foreign devil he was,— well, Jim took his gods where he found them, and from that day Haig had never been able to rid himself of this idolator.

"Tien-Tsin! Tien-Tsin!" Haig repeated, lingering covetously on the words. "But that was a fight, eh!"

"No likee!" replied Jim.

"No likee!" cried Haig. "Why, you hypocritical young ruffian, you! That was one of the happiest nights of your life. You're always trying to make people think you're asleep, or timid. I can see, right now, that long knife of yours slip under my arm, and catch the big fellow in the stomach. He just coughed once, and crumpled up at my feet. In the nick of time, too, Jim, and I let the next one have it. The rest of them took to their heels, and you with your long pigsticker after them. No likee! Jim, you're a moon-faced old liar, and a disgrace to your ten thousand and seven ancestors."

Jim's smile was perfectly noncommittal. He was too wily to appear eager. Besides, he did not really like fighting, which made all the more trouble for somebody when he had to fight. But he was heartily sick of this cold and uneventful life in the Park. Better a thousand times the foolish adventures, the unnecessary battles, the restless wanderings of other days!

"That was a night!" said Haig, flinging himself back in his chair to gaze dreamily into the flames, while Jim, like a blue ghost, stole noiselessly away. And there,

in the glow of the dying fire, bright and alluring visions successively took shape: A red-and-yellow temple on a hill, to which a thousand steps led up from a lake the color of a blue heron's breast; a junk with sails of purple creeping out of a morning mist as yellow as saffron; an island with a still lagoon in its center, and coconut palms alive with screaming parrots of every gorgeous hue; a sandy beach where jabbering natives dragged the flotsam of a wrecked steamer out of the breakers; a village on a high plateau, where a drum throbbed incessantly, and naked Indian children peered out from behind the huts; a skirmish line in khaki crawling up to the brow of a shell-swept hill; a dog-team yelping under the long lash of a half-breed Aleut, on a frozen river that sparkled in the sun; a sweating jungle where two bright spots glowed balefully in the gloom.

"God!" groaned Haig, as he sat erect at last, and reached for the glass, now cold. He tasted it, and set it back with a wry face.

"Damn Thursby!" he muttered. "Does he think I'm going to stay here forever, like a bear in a pit?"

He woke the next morning in an ugly humor, having slept little, and then only to dream such dreams as fed his discontent. He berated Jim because the biscuits were cold (which was not Jim's fault), and because the coffee was hot (which was according to his orders). Trivial annoyances, most of them of his own making or imagining, multiplied on all sides, fomenting his irritability until, by the time he strode out of the cottage, his temper was at white heat. What might have happened to the patient, devoted men about the

stable and corrals is not difficult of conjecture, but they were saved by Sunnysides. Almost the first object that caught Haig's eye was the yellow outlaw gleaming in the morning sunlight.

"Ah!" he exclaimed.

His inner turmoil of these last few days had banished all thought of the stallion of the San Luis. But now, his eyes gleamed as he quickened his steps toward the stable.

Farrish and Pete were at work among the stalls; Bill stood guard over Sunnysides; and the fourth man, Curly, was mending a saddle in the harness-room.

"Farrish!" Haig called out, striding into the stable. "We'll tackle the yellow fellow this morning."

Farrish and Pete turned, and looked at him curiously.

"All right!" answered Farrish; and then added doubtfully: "Now?"

"Yes. At once."

Farrish, in a manner that showed a certain reluctance, put up the currycomb with which he had been grooming the sorrels, and started toward the rear door. But Pete stood still.

"You too, Pete!" said Haig, impatiently.

"I think you better not — to-day," answered the Indian, in his slow way.

"Why?" snapped Haig.

Pete had seen the expression on Haig's face, and did not like it. But he hesitated to utter what was in his mind.

"Why?" repeated Haig.

"I think you better wait," was all that Pete could say.

"Hell!" cried Haig. "Get your lariat! And be quick about it!"

He had read Pete's thought; his ill-humor had evidently shown itself in his face; but the caution only whetted his purpose. Throwing off his coat as he went, he passed through the rear door of the barn, and climbed into the outlaw's corral, followed by Farrish, Curly, and Pete.

Sunnysides received them with suspicion. His head was high, his nostrils were dilated, his tail swished slowly, like a tiger's. One forefoot was raised a little, resting on the toe, and the muscles of his shoulders quivered under the glossy hide. He had fully recovered from the effects of his rough treatment on the road, and his skin shone with a satin-like luster in the morning sun.

There was a moment's pause, while Haig and the others looked at the horse, and he at them.

"Now then, Farrish! Pete!" commanded Haig.

And the battle began. Farrish and Pete turn by turn flung their lariats at the horse's head and feet, but time after time he dodged, and ducked, and capered away from the whirling noose, or wriggled out of the coil as it tightened around him.

"He's greased lightning!" ejaculated Bill, from his perch on the fence.

"He's hell, that's what he is!" retorted Curly, from a corner of the corral.

Farrish and Pete went silently on with their work. They knew that eventually, dance and squirm as he might, the horse would be caught in one or the other of the relentless loops. And so it proved. While Sunny-

sides was side-stepping a throw by Farrish, Pete's rope slipped snakily over his head, and tightened around the arched neck. With an artful lunge toward the Indian, and a lowering of his head, the horse struggled to throw off the coil. But it held.

Then followed a mad performance. The horse was over all the corral at once, it seemed: rearing, plunging, leaping, tossing his head, crashing into the fence with such fury that it barely stood up under his onslaughts. Bill was knocked off the fence backward on to his head; Curly, crowded into his corner, barely avoided a vicious kick; and Haig's temper was not improved by the narrow escape he had from being crushed against a post.

"Bill!" he yelled. "Get a rope!"

The man ran into the barn, returned with a lariat, and joined the fray. Plainly chagrined, though unhurt by his fall, Bill took long chances to even up the score; and under the very hoofs of the infuriated animal, he made a throw that brought Sunnysides sprawling on the ground, his forefeet caught in Bill's noose. It was the work of a few seconds then for Farrish to secure the hind feet also; and the horse lay prostrate, panting and half-choked, but defiant still.

Giving him no time to recover, and no more breath than he actually required, Haig and Curly forced the bit of a bridle into the outlaw's foaming mouth. Then the noose on his hind feet was cautiously removed, one forefoot was freed, and the horse was allowed to rise. The next proceeding appeared to be resented by Sunnysides even more than what he had already been subjected to. While Farrish and Pete held his head, Haig approached him cautiously with a saddle, and dropped it

on his back. There was a lightning-like motion, and the saddle was tossed a dozen feet away, while the two men at the horse's head were jerked almost off their feet. Again and again the saddle was laid on his back, to remain there barely an instant. But at the fifth attempt, to the astonishment of all, Sunnysides stood still, as if, being an equine Napoleon, he had changed his plan of battle in the face of the enemy. Without further resistance, he permitted the saddle to be adjusted and cinched, permitted the men to lead him out of the corral into the larger one adjoining it, and permitted Haig to mount him and take the bridle reins in his hand.

"I'll be damned!" said Curly. "You'd think—"

"Shut up!" cried Farrish. "That's a bluff."

"Now then!" ordered Haig, pointing to the rope that still held one forefoot.

The rope was removed.

"The other!"

Pete and Farrish slipped off the lariat that remained noosed around the outlaw's neck, and stepped back.

For some seconds there was no sound, no motion, no sign of any design on the part of Sunnysides. Then, with the swiftness and surprise of a flash of powder in the dark, a shocking thing occurred. Without a preliminary movement, either of lunging or bucking or leaping to one side, or any of the expected tactics, Sunnysides, with incredible suddenness, reared straight up into the air, threw himself over, and fell on his back, pinning Haig to the ground beneath him.

Before any of the men could move, the horse rolled over sprawling, scrambled to his feet, and charged at

the fence. There was a crash and the sound of splintering wood. The top plank fell, broken in two jagged pieces, and the horse's forefeet were over the second plank. But before he could leap again, Curley had caught the bridle rein, and swung the outlaw's head around, holding him there until Bill had leaned over the broken fence and roped the forelegs once more. After a moment of furious struggle, Sunnysides appeared to realize that it was useless; and thus the two men held him, with his forefeet still hanging outside the fence, while they turned their eyes toward Haig.

Farrish and the Indian knelt at his side. He lay quite still, unconscious, and for a moment they thought him dead. Pete put his head down on Haig's breast, and listened. Then he rose to his feet.

"Whisky!" he muttered, and ran toward the stable.

In two minutes he was back, bearing a flask, which he uncorked as he ran. Forcing the mouth of it between Haig's lips, he let the scorching liquor trickle down the throat until the flask was half emptied. Then he poured some of the whisky in the palm of his hand, and rubbed it on Haig's face and bared breast and wrists, while Farrish, in his turn, ran to the stable and brought a lap robe, which he folded and placed under Haig's head.

They waited helplessly, without speech. At the fence, Bill and Curley clung to their ropes. Sunnysides, his forefeet still projecting over the plank, and the saddle hanging lopsided from his back, had his head drawn back so far that he could see the group in the middle of the corral. His eyes were bloodshot, foam dripped from his mouth, the breath came whistling through his half-shut windpipe.

But in the cottonwoods the birds sang undisturbed, and the pines far up the hill droned their old tune unchanged. From the ranch house came the rattle of tin pans, and the voice of the cook singing a song of the round-up.

After a long time, Haig stirred. A moan came with the first deep breath; his eyes opened, staring up at the two faces above him; his lips moved, but at first no sound came from them. Pete leaned closer, and listened.

"Did — he — get — away?" came in a whisper.

"No," answered Pete. "He caught."

A smile flickered on Haig's lips, and went out; and at the same time a tiny trickle of blood oozed out, and ran down through the dust on the white cheek. Pete and Farrish looked at each other; and when they turned to Haig again, his eyes were closed, and the pallor of his face had deepened to a bluish, ashen hue.

Pete bent quickly to put his ear again to Haig's breast.

CHAPTER XIII

HILLYER'S DILEMMA

HILLYER'S loyal heart was near to bursting with joy. In all the days of his eager courtship Marion had never seemed so close to him, so fairly within his grasp, as now. She had welcomed him with totally unexpected warmth, considering the many times she had rejected him, and considering, too, the letter he had received from her on her departure. Absence, he thought, had advanced his cause for him. A dozen times he was on the point of boldly violating the six months' embargo she had placed upon his pleadings; but as often as the fervent words rose to his lips fear froze them there, and he was silent.

As for Marion, she was for the moment absorbed in a little plan that was not for Robert's knowledge. She was intent upon meeting Philip in Robert's company; she wanted to bow to him, and smile, and let him see that there was one man at least who prized her, if he did not. But the imp of perversity seemed to have come to abide permanently in the Park. Though Marion, in the first two days of Robert's visit, guided him, in the big automobile, everywhere except beyond the Ridge and to the glade of the columbines, she had never a glimpse of Philip. All this maddened her; and if Robert had but spoken, there were times when— But Robert did not speak.

Near noon of the third day they met Smythe in the main valley road a mile or so below the post-office. At sight of him bobbing along toward them, almost lost between his horse and his sombrero, Marion's first impulse was to speed past him without stopping. She was not sure she could trust his discretion; for she had told Robert nothing about Philip Haig. But she did not wish to offend the faithful Smythe; and so, on second thought, she hurriedly acquainted Robert with the identity of the approaching figure, and warned him to control his inevitable mirth.

"He is funny," she said, laughing in spite of herself, "but he can't help that. He's been very good to me, in his way."

In the meantime Smythe's horse was deciding the matter on his own account. This was the first automobile the pony had ever seen, and he made up his mind promptly that he did not like it. He reared and bucked, bolting first to one side and the other of the road, and refused to consider Smythe's well-worded assurance that wise horses were really fond of automobiles, which were taking a great deal of work off their shoulders.

Hillyer stopped the machine, and cut off the power. But the pony's suspicions had been thoroughly aroused, and the sudden silence seemed to him more portentous than even the noise of the motor. Smythe thereupon had his work cut out for him, but he would not compromise either by dismounting, or by turning and riding away. Slowly and patiently he urged the frightened pony toward the automobile until, after many setbacks and panics, he had brought him near enough for conversation.

"There now, Peanuts!" he said to the prancing animal. "You see you were quite mistaken." Then, to Hillyer and Marion: "He's a little like myself. He doesn't really believe in ghosts, but he's dreadfully afraid of them."

"I didn't know you were such an accomplished horseman," said Marion.

"Didn't you? Well, you see —"

At that instant the pony suffered a fresh access of alarm. He bounded suddenly sideways, and at the same time ducked as if he purposed to stand on his head, though what good that would have done only he knew. The movement threw Smythe over the pony's head, and flat on his back in the dust; and in a twinkling Peanuts was dashing up the road, with his tail in the air, and the stirrups flapping at his sides.

For some seconds Smythe lay half-stunned; but before Marion and Hillyer, leaping from the automobile, were able to reach him, he sat up, and began to straighten out his crushed sombrero, eyeing it critically. He was covered with dust, and one end of his white collar, torn from the button, stuck out above his coat. But his aplomb was perfect.

"As I was saying, when interrupted," he began, continuing to minister to the sombrero, "you see I am an accomplished horseman."

Marion and Hillyer broke out in uncontrollable laughter. Then Hillyer hastened to assist Smythe to rise.

"Not hurt, I hope?" said Robert.

"Objectively, no. Subjectively, yes. Sartorially, a wreck."

They laughed now without restraint, which seemed to please Smythe immensely. He proceeded to tuck the end of the torn collar back into its place, where it refused to stay; to brush his clothes; to adjust the abused sombrero in exactly the long-studied angle on his head.

"I hope you'll forgive us for laughing," said Marion, "but —"

"Say no more about it, please!" protested Smythe. "I'd rather make you laugh than weep — assuming that anybody would weep for me."

"Oh, I'd have felt very badly if you'd been hurt," Marion assured him. "And you might have been, too."

"No, a cropper like that's nothing. Peanuts isn't —" He paused just a second to look into Marion's eyes with an expression that arrested her attention sharply. "Peanuts isn't Sunnysides."

"Sunnysides?" she cried out unguardedly.

Smythe's eyes warned her, as he waited to give her time for self-control. He did not know how far Hillyer was in her confidence.

"Is there news — about — Sunnysides?" she faltered, struggling desperately with herself.

"Yes," he answered. Then he continued slowly, in as light a manner as possible, the while he held her with a concentrated gaze: "I'd been down the valley as far as the mouth of the canyon. Coming back, about two miles below where Haig's road joins this, I saw the sorrels in a cloud of dust. 'Hello!' I said. 'Something's up, or the sorrels wouldn't be driven like that.' In a minute or two I made out Bill Craven, one of Haig's

men, leaning forward in the seat of a road wagon, and laying on the whip. 'If Haig saw that!' I thought. And so I —"

"Go on, please!" said Marion shrilly.

But Smythe was purposely deliberate; for he saw Hillyer looking at her curiously.

"I wasn't going to let anybody abuse his horses if I could prevent it. Besides, how did I know but Craven was stealing the sorrels? I threw my pony straight across the road. Craven reined the sorrels up on their hind legs, almost on top of me.

"'What in hell?' he yelled.

"'That's what I want to know,' I answered.

"'Can't you see I'm in a hurry, damn you?' he shouted angrily.

"'That's exactly what I do see,' I replied. 'But Haig never whips those horses.'

"'That's none of your business, and Haig ain't carin' much now,' he fired back at me. 'Get out o' my way, or I'll —'

"'Now just keep cool!' I told him. 'What's the trouble?'

"Craven snorted, but he told me, as the quickest way out of it. Haig had been hurt — trying to ride Sunnysides. He's —"

"Hurt? How?" asked Marion; and Smythe was relieved to detect a new steadiness in her voice. She had passed the danger point.

"The horse went over backwards, pinning him to the ground, with the saddle horn in his stomach. Craven's gone for the doctor."

She gave him one long, searching look, as if to pluck

out anything he might have been hiding from her. Then she turned swiftly toward the automobile.

"Come, Robert! Quick!" she commanded.

She climbed quickly into the machine, followed by Hillyer, who was puzzled and alarmed by what he had seen in Marion's face.

"You too, Mr. Smythe. Hurry!" cried Marion.

"But my horse?" objected Smythe.

"He'll run home," answered Marion impatiently. "Come! We may need you."

Smythe obeyed, and jumped into the tonneau, while Robert cranked up and threw in the clutch.

"Fast!" cried Marion.

Hillyer glanced at her. She was very white; her lips were pressed together, her eyes were fixed on the road ahead. The machine lurched under them.

"Faster!" urged Marion, in another minute.

The machine, with a kind of shudder, responded to Hillyer's hand, and shot out with fresh speed.

Another brief silence.

"The cut-out!" she ordered.

Hillyer bent to the mechanism, and the engine, with the muffler off, roared and shrieked as it took the smooth white road, with every bar and rivet throbbing under the pressure. Only then did Marion turn, and motion to Smythe. He leaned forward, clinging to the back of her seat.

"The doctor?" she shouted in his ear.

"Craven had started for Tellurium," he yelled back. "Said he'd kill the sorrels. I told him there was a doctor at Lake Cobalt — Doctor Norris of Omaha — just arrived, with his family. 'You're not such a fool

after all,' said Craven. (I'll talk with him about that later.) 'Thanks!' I said, and pulled my horse out of the way. 'That saves two days.' He gave the horses the whip again, and I started for Huntington's to tell you — Watch out! There's the turn!" he shouted in Hillyer's ear.

The wheels tore up the sand as the machine, with the power off but still going at more than half-speed under its momentum, skidded and scraped around the turn into Haig's road.

"Now!" cried Marion.

Again the automobile shivered, and plunged, and went clamoring like a mad thing up the little valley, the hills echoing back its roar. The white road leaped up at them, gulping them in. A red steer, astray from some pasture, crossed the road far ahead of them, and Marion closed her eyes as the machine, with a sickening swerve, missed it by inches. The next instant she was pointing to the group of buildings squatting under the hill; and then she was out of the automobile, and running to Farrish at the door of the barn. His face confirmed her worst fears.

"Where is he?" she asked, with a swift look around.

He pointed toward the larger of the two cottages. With Hillyer and Smythe silently following, she ran to the cottage, and through the open door. There she found herself in a bare, uncarpeted room, furnished only with two chairs and a table. On the table lay a faded and battered gray hat. For an instant her gaze rested on it, and a lump rose in her throat. But she resolutely turned away, tightening her lips.

There were two inner doors, one of which, ajar, re

vealed a glimpse of brightly polished pans hanging on the wall. The other door was closed. After an instant of hesitation, she walked straight toward it.

"Marion!" called Hillyer warningly.

She did not heed him, but turned the knob, softly opened the door, and with Robert and Smythe at her heels, stepped into a dimly lighted room where the aroma of a pine log blazing in the fireplace mingled with the pungent odor of ammonia. Smythe was quick to observe, over Marion's shoulder, that the room was a sort of library and bedroom combined, carpeted in dark red, the walls papered in red also, and the windows curtained with heavy tapestry silk of the same rich hue. There were low bookcases on two sides of the room, with pictures above them; several marble statuettes on the bookcases; and a little jade Buddha beside a two-foot bronze god of terrifying aspect on the mantelpiece. In the middle of the apartment stood a solid library table, of which the cover was a curious strip of faded yellow silk embroidered with a dragon in green, a fragment of an old Chinese banner.

At the left of the door, its head against the wall, was a brass bed in which a figure moved restlessly under the covers. Near the head of the bed, on the side nearest the door, stood the Indian, his stolid, bronzed face turned toward Marion as she entered. On the other side, holding one of Haig's hands, knelt Slim Jim in his blue silks, his yellowish face as expressionless as Pete's, except for an alert and questioning look in his eyes. There was no sound except the low crackling of the fire, and the rasp of heavy breathing, with sharp catches in it that spoke eloquently of pain.

Marion stepped to Pete's side, and looked down into the face of Philip Haig. In the dim light it had the pallor of death, with the parted lips and the staring eyes of the dead, or the dying. But he breathed; and presently her steady, searching, pitying gaze brought his eyes to meet her own, and she saw that they were living eyes, though clouded and darkened with agony. Almost was she on her knees, weeping over him, regardless of those in the doorway watching her. And it was not their presence so much as the necessity for action that restrained and steadied her. She did not even speak his name; but after her one long look, she turned away, and with every outward sign of calm, removed her gloves and hat and coat, and placed them on a chair in a corner of the room. Then she beckoned to Pete, who followed her, with Smythe and Hillyer, into the bare outer room.

"Close the door, please!" she commanded quietly.

Smythe closed it.

"Where is he hurt?" she asked the Indian.

"Here." He laid a hand on his stomach.

"Was he unconscious?"

"Yes. Long time."

"How long has he been like that — awake?"

"Maybe two hours."

"What have you done? What have you given him?"

"Whisky."

"Nothing else?"

"Water. Ammonia on face and breast."

"Was there blood?"

"Yes. From mouth."

She had another struggle then, and the tears start

in spite of all that she could do. But she conquered them.

"Much blood?"

"No. Little, only at first."

"Thank you, Pete." Then, turning to Hillyer: "I want you, Robert, please, to drive home, and tell Mrs. Huntington to make up a bundle of the things I shall need. Wait! A pencil and a bit of paper, please."

For a moment he did not move to comply.

"What are you going to do, Marion?" he asked, his voice shaking slightly with the effort of speaking calmly.

"I'm going to nurse him," she replied, meeting his look without flinching.

"But, Marion! I don't —"

"Pencil and paper, Robert!" she said firmly.

He tore a leaf from a notebook, and gave it to her with his pencil.

"Thank you," she said; and seated herself at the table to write.

But there was the dilapidated hat again — so stained and soiled, a crumpled, tragic, intimate thing — arresting her. How it had filled her dreams! How she had laughed at it, fondly, tenderly, as a mother smiles at the battered school hat of her boy! Once, she had fancied it hanging on the pink wall in her room, a trophy, with a ribbon tied around its sweated band. And now she wanted to grab it up, and hug it to her breast. But she only lifted it gently, and placed it a little farther away, on the other side of the table. Then she made her notes.

"There, Robert!" she said, rising, and handing the list to him. "Claire will know where to find them."

He took the paper mechanically, his eyes fixed on Marion.

"Will you come down to the car for a moment?" he asked.

She saw the look, and softened under it. But she could not answer his questions then.

"No," she said. "Later, if you wish it."

For a moment he hesitated. But he could say no more in the presence of Smythe and Pete, though they were talking together at the other side of the room. So he moved slowly away, but was suddenly stopped by a cry from Marion.

"Oh! Oh!" she exclaimed. "Why didn't somebody — why didn't I think of it before? The car? Run, Robert! Drive down the road toward the lake. You'll overtake the horrels — or meet them. Bring the doctor in the car. Fast, please!"

Hillyer, without another word, ran and leaped into the automobile, and was soon bringing the echoes out of the hills again. He sank low in the seat, and fixed his eyes on the road that stretched out blinding white in the sunlight.

CHAPTER XIV

COALS OF FIRE

SETH was oiling a pair of boots on the veranda, while Claire talked to him about Hillyer, who had pleased her immeasurably by his devotion to Marion, and even more, of course, by his generous compliments to herself. She was delicately calling Seth's attention to the pleasure, the profits, and the sanctity of politeness, when she caught sight of Hillyer's automobile emerging slowly and silently from the trees that concealed the road at a little distance from the corrals.

"There he is now!" she exclaimed. And then, an instant later: "Why, he's alone!"

She stood up excitedly, and Seth also, dropping a half-oiled boot on the floor.

"What the devil?" ejaculated Huntington.

So they stood, waiting and wondering, while Hillyer alighted from the automobile, and walked, with exasperating slowness — with reluctance, if they had but known it — up the graveled path among the flower beds. Something in the look of him caused Claire to clutch a post of the veranda for support.

"Where's Marion?" she cried.

"She's all right," replied Hillyer, as he mounted the steps. "That is, nothing has happened to her. But there's been an accident." He hesitated. "Who is this Philip Haig?"

"Haig? What about Haig?" demanded Huntington.

"He's been hurt. A horse threw him."

"Sunnysides?" cried Huntington excitedly.

"I believe so."

"He will, will he?" chuckled Huntington. "That serves —"

"But Marion?" interrupted Claire. "What about Marion?"

Hillyer looked doubtfully from one to the other, in much embarrassment. What did they know? Or were they as ignorant as he of the situation that had been revealed to him as if by the flash of a thunderbolt? And how much should he disclose to them, in loyalty to Marion? But in his pocket was Marion's list.

"She's there — with him," he said at length.

"There? Where?" thundered Huntington.

"At his house."

They stood stock-still, staring at him.

"She wishes Mrs. Huntington to make up a bundle of these things for me to take to her."

He handed the list to Claire, who took it, and held it at arm's length, regarding it curiously, as if she had not understood.

"You mean that —" she began, and stopped.

"She says she's going to nurse him."

"She's going to — what?" Claire's voice rose almost to a shriek.

"Nurse him."

"And you've left her there with that —"

Huntington was going to say "ruffian," but was checked by a sudden recollection, as well as by the look

that Hillyer flashed at him. For a moment the two men faced each other, the one with anger boiling up inside of him, the other struggling to put down the resentment aroused by Huntington's belligerent tone. Claire crushed the slip of paper in her hand, and watched them fearfully.

"I judge from your manner," said Hillyer at length, when he had controlled himself, "that you dislike her being there as much as I do. But as I am all in the dark, I'll be greatly obliged to you if you will answer my question. Who is Philip Haig?"

"That's what I'd like to know!" blurted out Huntington.

Hillyer made a gesture of impatience.

"But he's your neighbor," he said curtly.

"And that's about all I know of him," Huntington replied, "except that we ought to have run him out of the Park long ago, and will do it yet, so help me God!"

"Why?" asked Hillyer shortly.

Then, as clearly as he could in his rage, Seth gave Hillyer a brief account of the events of the four years that Haig had been in the Park,— an account that satisfied Hillyer as little as it had satisfied Marion. He had meant, in the beginning, to ask how Marion had come to know Haig, and if they had been much together; but he now surmised that Huntington and his wife were as ignorant as himself of that acquaintanceship, or friendship, or whatever it was that could have made possible the astounding emotions he had seen on Marion's face. Hillyer's situation was difficult. If Marion had a secret he must guard it for her, whatever it

might cost him. Yet now he needed help, and no one could help him but Huntington and his wife. And at the first words on the subject, Huntington had (more in the tone of his speech than the matter) shown him that little help could be expected in that quarter. Last of all, and not to be forgotten, he was the Huntingtons' guest.

"How bad's he hurt?" asked Huntington.

Hillyer shook his head dubiously.

"It's impossible to say just yet. Doctor Norris fears that the pancreas is ruptured. In that case—" He shrugged his shoulders. "At any rate, the pancreas and the stomach are temporarily paralyzed by the blow of the saddle horn — the horse seems to have gone over backward on him. If he gets over the shock there's still the danger of inflammation. There ought to be ice packs. Cold water will have to do. They must be changed every minute. Doctor Norris told me—" He paused to look intently at Claire—"Doctor Norris told me that nothing but the most careful nursing can save him."

"Let the Chinaman do it!" Huntington blurted out.

Hillyer shook his head.

"No. Norris says he will not trust him. You see, Haig's pleading for water must be denied. He can command the Chinaman, and that— Besides, all this is not to the point. Marion has made up her mind, and I assure you— Please get the things she asks for, Mrs. Huntington."

"You don't mean you're going to take them!" shouted Huntington.

"Certainly. She's asked for them."

"And you're going to let her stay there — with him?"

Hillyer smiled. Having abandoned all hope of assistance from Huntington, he was thinking of other measures, and was scarcely as attentive as he might have been to the increasing truculence of his host.

"What would you do?" he asked quietly.

"I'd bring her away!"

"Would you care to go and try it?"

This was a keener thrust than Hillyer had any intention of delivering, provoked though he was by Huntington's behavior; for Seth had not included in his narrative any reference to the affair at the post-office, or to Haig's visit to his house. Huntington's face became purple; and if he had been apoplectic in disposition he would surely have suffered a seizure in that moment of choking rage.

"I'll go there right enough!" he bellowed. "I'll go, when I get ready. I'll go when he's able to stand up and take what's coming to him. As for her — you can take her things, and her trunks too, while you're about it."

Hillyer gazed at him dumbfounded for just a breath of time. Then his own face flamed.

"Quite right, Mr. Huntington!" he said, taking a step toward him. "I haven't seen much of Haig, but from what I've seen of you, I think his house can be no worse place for Miss Gaylord than yours. What's more, you're an—" He caught himself, whirled on his heel, and addressed Claire. "May I ask you, please, to pack Marion's trunks. I'll attend to mine."

Claire had stood quite silent, with her blue eyes open-

ing wider and wider, for the moment helpless, but trusting more to Hillyer's resources of diplomacy than to her husband's self-control. Now her face crimsoned with mortification, and she stood up with all the inches of her five foot two.

"You'll do no such thing!" she cried, and one little heel came down on the floor with a jolt. "The idea! The very idea! Oh!"

For a moment she stood poised, like a butterfly in a rage, if one can imagine it; then she tripped straight to Huntington, clasped the lapels of his coat, and drew herself up on tiptoes, trying to meet his eyes.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" she cried.

"No, I'm not!" he growled.

But he was, or at least was dimly conscious of his egregious misbehavior; for he looked neither at Hillyer nor his wife, and was red now where he had been purple.

"But you are, though!" She turned her face toward Hillyer, without loosing her hold on Seth's coat. "Don't you mind him, Mr. Hillyer! He's just a big bear. And Haig has been a trial to us. Marion's my guest, and—" She looked up into Seth's beard again— "If you think you're going to send her away like this—"

She stopped short, as on a sudden thought, and then with a giggle, buried her face in his flannel shirt. And the next thing, as unexpected as her blue-eyed rage, she dropped her hands from his coat, stooped to catch up the hem of her skirt between thumb and forefinger of each hand, and began to pirouette around the room.

"Oh, ho!" she exclaimed, laughing triumphantly

her little body swaying as she tripped, with low curtsies to Seth and Hillyer, who for the moment forget their animosity in wonder at this feminine diversion. "Beautiful! Gorgeous! Oh, splendid!"

She stopped, at length, in front of Seth, dropped to one knee, bowed till her golden head almost touched the floor, and rose again to stand with her hands on her hips, her arms akimbo, her face flushed with excitement.

"Seth Huntington!" she cried ecstatically. "Do you know what we're going to do?"

He merely stared.

"We're going to heap coals of fire on his head."

"What do you mean?" demanded Huntington uneasily.

"Marion's going to nurse Haig. There's no way any of us can stop her. She's our cousin and guest, and we've got to show it. If they want to talk, we'll give them something to talk about. *I'll go and nurse Haig too!*"

Dead silence.

"Ah!" cried Hillyer.

"You'll not!" roared Huntington.

"Watch me!" retorted Claire, turning swiftly, and running toward her bedroom. But halfway there she stopped. "No, don't watch me! You just go and look after the cattle. Leave this Mr. Haig to us, and he'll be the best friend you ever had before Marion and I get through with him."

Hillyer, recovering from his amazement, stepped smiling to where she stood, and reached both his hands to her.

"Mrs. Huntington," he said warmly. "You're a peach!"

She laughed gaily, and put both her tiny hands in his, for just an instant.

This was the last straw. Seth snorted like a baited animal, whirled around, bolted from the house, and ran blindly to the barn.

"Saddle Nigger!" he yelled to Williams, who obeyed with stumbling alacrity, while Huntington strode up and down before the door.

From the window of the ranch house Claire and Hillyer, silent, watched him until he had flung himself into the saddle, dug the spurs into the flanks of his favorite and now astonished black horse, and disappeared up the hill.

"Where's he going?" asked Hillyer, suspicious that Huntington meant mischief.

Claire drew back from the window with a sigh of relief.

"He's going to—" She laughed softly, but with just a little tremor in her voice— "He's going to—look after the cattle."

Hillyer saw that her blue eyes were moist.

"He's the best man in the world, and—I love him," she said, looking at Hillyer with a soft appeal. "You believe that, don't you?"

"Indeed I do, Mrs. Huntington," Hillyer answered heartily.

"Then you must forgive him; he has such a temper!"

"I'm sorry we had any misunderstanding," Hillyer was able to say sincerely. "I'll talk it over with him—later."

"Please!" urged Claire.

"But I must go now. Those things for Marion, please."

"I'll have them ready in a minute. And I've only to slip on another dress, and —"

"But you don't mean — You're not going?"

"Of course I am!" she answered, with a look of surprise.

"I think you'd better not," he said quietly.

"But why?"

"Now think a minute, Mrs. Huntington. Your husband objects to your going. It will not only anger him more, but it will hurt him. Isn't that so?"

"Yes," she admitted reluctantly.

Her coals of fire had kindled her imagination. Such a romantic idea! There would be such talk, such a sensation!

"It would be another matter if there were anything you could do," Hillyer went on. "But there isn't. And I know very well that Marion would send you back if you did go."

That was true enough, on reflection; but it was a disappointment!

"But Marion! There alone!" she said, making her last stand.

"I shall be there," replied Hillyer. "The Chinaman's going to fix a bed for me. I'll look after Marion."

So she yielded, and was glad of it when she had time to think it over. She gave Hillyer the bundle for Marion, and watched him go, waving a good-by from the veranda. Then she hastened to the kitchen to make apple dumplings for supper. If there was one thing

that could always be counted on to soothe Seth it was apple dumplings.

Meanwhile it was indeed a black day for Huntington. Fate was against him. Tearing himself, mangled in spirit, out of one trap, he rode blindly into another. Far up in the hills, riding savagely, he knew not where, nor cared, vowing dark vengeance on Haig, his attention was drawn at last by the weird and ominous bellowing of cattle. Following the sound, he came to a little hollow where a hundred or more cattle were gathered, like the rapt spectators in an amphitheater, around two bulls engaged in mortal combat. One, as Seth quickly saw, was a red Hereford, his best thoroughbred; the other, a black Angus, and even more valuable, was Haig's. The red bull, bleeding from many wounds, was plainly being worsted in the encounter. With a roar of rage, Huntington drew his revolver, urged his unwilling horse down into the arena where the turf was torn up for many yards around the combatants, circled about until he could take sure aim, and emptied every chamber of the gun into the head and neck of the Angus. The bull sank to the ground, head first, in a lumbering mass that kicked once or twice, shivered, and lay still.

But the Hereford, red-eyed with blood and fury, turned on Huntington, and drove him, barely escaping being gored, into the thick timber. In a place of safety Huntington jerked his horse around, and sat limp in the saddle, staring down at the scene of his final humiliation.

"That's it! That's it!" he bellowed. "Even my own bull turns on me. Haw! Haw!" His hollow,

hoarse, and unmirthful laughter echoed among the pines. "Great joke! Haig will like that. And the rest of them. Hell!"

But Haig! And the Angus! Well, there'd got to be a show-down anyhow pretty soon. He dismounted, and seated himself on a fallen tree trunk, and gave himself up to reflections upon which it is only the most obvious kindness and discretion to draw the curtain.

CHAPTER XV

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

THE days dragged by under the burdens of doubt and torture, and out of the Valley of the Shadow came Philip Haig, with some new and disquieting thoughts to occupy him in his convalescence. Toiling up out of the darkness, where foul fiends seemed to have torn and mangled his body with their fiery claws, his fingers were still warm from the pressure of a soft, guiding hand; there was a haunting memory of kisses on his forehead, of a cheek laid close to his; and he could still hear the gentle but commanding voice that told him to be patient — to be still — that life was coming back to him.

Life! As if he cared for life! Had he not spent years on years in seeking what just now had been in his very grasp, only to be withdrawn by two caressing hands? And Doctor Norris, on the day of his final visit, had left him no possibility of misunderstanding.

"Miss Gaylord has saved your life," he said. "I could do little. It was her nursing that pulled you through."

He wanted much to tell the doctor just how much value he placed on that life. But to what purpose? Doctors lived in their own peculiar atmosphere of conceit and self-deception, crowing like a hen over a new-

laid egg whenever they chanced to bring back a soul to the miseries from which it had struggled to escape. It would be a waste of words, for Norris would never understand. Would Marion? Cold terror seized him at the thought of the coming, the inevitable scene with her. She, he realized vaguely, was different from — from all the others he had ever seen and looked down upon from his safe heights of cynical hatred and contempt. She was not selfish or mercenary — not consciously selfish or mercenary. And she was not vile. But she was all the more dangerous because her heart was pure. She was too high-bred, too fine, to demand payment of his debt; but her very reticence and delicacy, he foresaw, would make his repudiation of that debt — that factitious debt — more difficult. Twice or thrice, as he struggled with his problem, he was conscious of a curious, disturbing thrill. She loved him. There had been a time, long, long ago — But now he was a man; he had learned his lesson; and he knew that the chains would be no less hateful because they were made of gold.

There came a day when he sat, wrapped in blankets, in an armchair near the window, where he could see the grass waving in the sunlight on the slope above the cottage, and the pines bending in the breeze high up the hill. Marion, near him, her hands folded in her lap, looked sometimes out of the window but more often at him, though his eyes avoided hers. She was scarcely less pale than he, and very tired and worn. Despite Hillyer's protestations she had slept little in the ten days of Philip's peril; for she would trust no one but herself to do with iron determination exactly what the

doctor had commanded. Philip's pitiable pleading for water in his semi-delirium her love alone was strong enough to resist. But this was the last day of her watch over him. In an hour she must go. She had frankly asked Robert to let her have this last afternoon alone with Philip; and had promised him that he should then have the answer to every question that he had loyally put aside for her.

They sat a long time silent, while the shadow of the cottage lengthened on the grass.

"It wasn't worth it, Miss Gaylord," Haig said at length.

"I — I don't understand," she faltered.

"Doctor Norris tells me that you saved my life."

"I'm glad if he thinks I helped a little," she answered, trying to smile.

"He left me no room for doubt. Very plain-spoken is Doctor Norris."

"I'm afraid he exaggerated," she protested gently.

"No."

"But Jim —"

"Jim's all right in his way, but he couldn't have done it."

"I am paid," she said simply.

"Paid?"

"Yes. Knowing that you live."

"No. You think you mean that, perhaps, but you don't."

"I don't mean what?" she asked in surprise.

"You don't mean that you are paid."

She turned away, and looked out the window, her heart throbbing.

"I must tell you something, Miss Gaylord," he went on resolutely. "I'm not grateful."

"Not grateful?"

"I mean, I'm not glad to owe my life to you."

"But I haven't asked —"

"No. Not directly." He hesitated a moment. "It's like this: If a man had saved my life, I could pay him. There would be a clasp of the hand, and a look from man to man. Or I should save his life in turn, or do him some service. Or — there are other ways. There's Pete's way and Jim's way — of paying. But I can't pay you in any of the ways I could pay a man. And I can't pay in the only way a woman knows."

"Don't," she cried. "Don't, please!"

She was right, he thought. He was doing it brutally. He must try another method. There followed a long silence, while he tried to frame a speech that would tell her, and would not hurt too much; for now, strangely, he found himself reluctant to give her pain, even to put himself in a false light before her — to be misunderstood. At last he leaned toward her — forced her to meet his gaze.

"Could you — if you had ever loved one man with all your heart and soul — held him as dear to you as life — dearer than life itself — without whom life would be impossible — could you ever love another?"

For all her anguish she was able to detect the trap that he had set for her. "Yes" would cheapen the quality and deny the finality of her love for him; "no" would be an acceptance of the doom and tragedy she saw shadowing his eyes. She did not answer.

"You see, you dare not answer that," he went on. "I suppose I ought to tell you the story. But I won't. It's long, and not a pretty story at all. But this much I will tell you. I gave one woman all I had to give. She threw it away — and laughed at me. I have nothing more."

She took it very bravely and very quietly, as it seemed to him. He felt a certain admiration. There was good blood in the girl. Her father must have been worth knowing. His thoughts would have taken a different direction — would have been nothing so complacent if he had known just what she was thinking. His speech, terrifying at first, had actually renewed a hope that had fallen very low. She did not believe a word of what he had said, that is, of his having nothing more to give. Whenever did woman believe any such thing as that, no matter how solemnly, on what stoutest oaths, with what tragic air a man has told it to her? Love is not love that doubts its own compelling power. And Marion, gazing fondly at Philip now, felt somewhat as a mother feels who smilingly indulges some childhood tragedy of her boy, knowing that it will pass as the cloud upon an April sky. If this was the worst he had to say to her —

But it was not the worst. Philip felt an intense relief to see her accept the situation with such unexpected calm. He admired her consciously now,— for her intelligence. He began to think that he might almost take her hand, and thank her, as he would thank a man for doing him a service, however mistakenly. But something held him back from that folly. He wondered a little at her silence, and it was by way of breaking it

before it should become embarrassing that he searched for something safe and commonplace to say to her.

"It was my own fault, you know, that I was injured."

"Why your own fault?"

"I was in a bad humor. I lost my self-control. And I got what I deserved."

He thought she would ask him why he had been in a bad humor, and he purposed to say that he was raging in discontent, longing for the white road again. It would be safe enough now, no doubt, to tell her in this fashion that if ever she should come to the Park again she would not find him there. But his words had suggested something entirely different to her mind.

"What are you going to do with him?" she asked, in sudden vague anxiety.

"Do with him?"

"Yes — Sunnysides? I wish you'd please sell him."

"Sell him? Sell Sunnysides?" His voice betrayed his astonishment.

"Yes."

"But I haven't ridden him yet."

"You don't mean —" Her voice failed.

"That I'm going to ride him? Just as soon as I get well."

For some seconds she sat dazed. It was so utterly unexpected. The thought had not once occurred to her that he would try again what had all but cost him his life. It is at some such point as this that man's and woman's natures make one of their many departures from the parallel. To Haig the taming of Sunnysides now meant everything; to Marion it seemed a useless, a worse than useless risk, a wicked waste. What had been

the worth, then, of all her labor of love, if it was to be thrown away? He would be killed the next time. And in the horror with which she foresaw that tragic end of all that she had planned and builded, her courage and confidence fell away from her, and left her weak and helpless. She uttered a thin, little cry, and slipped to the floor on her knees, clasping his emaciated hand that lay on an arm of the chair.

"No! No!" she cried frantically. "Please, Philip! Please promise me you won't do that!"

Then she broke down completely, her head drooped, and she sank down in a heap, with her face between her hands.

Haig was stunned. He had blundered again. Fool, not to have let her go away from him in silence, in calm! He looked down at that crumpled figure, at the mass of tawny hair, with the red-gold lights in it, the enticing soft whiteness of her neck where the hair curved cleanly upward, the graceful slope of the shoulders that now shook with sobs. And something stirred in him, something deep, too deep to be reached and overpowered. It grew until it sang through all his being, a feeling such as he had never known before. She was fine and beautiful; she was a thing to be desired; and he had only to reach out, and take her for his own. Before he was aware of it, he had stretched out his hand until it almost touched her hair. Then from across the years a mocking voice rang out shrill and cold and cruel: "Now don't you go mussing up my apartment, Pipo!"

He drew back his hand with a jerk, and clutched the chair; and sat bolt upright, while every nerve rang with the alarm.

Minutes passed. The sobs gradually subsided; the figure on the floor slowly ceased its convulsive movements; and again a deep silence enveloped the room. Out on the brown-green slope the sun's rays were slanting low, the shadow of the cottage climbed the hill.

Well, Haig thought, he had bungled the business after all. That was what came of trying to do it nicely, with delicacy. Hard words were the kindest in the end, because the quickest understood.

She had not yet lifted her head when he turned to look at her again; and that made it easier.

"I can't leave the ranch — just now," he said slowly. "If I could, I would. So I think — I think you ought to go back home — to New York, I mean — at once."

She did not answer. And it was only after another silence that she looked up at him, and he saw that her eyes were still filled with tears, and there was a curious little puckering of her chin.

"You said you wished you could repay me," she said. "Do you?"

"Yes," he answered, wondering. "But I told you —"

"But there is a way!"

"Well?"

"Promise me you will not ride Sunnysides."

He shook his head.

"No. I can't promise that."

"Why?"

"That's one of the things you couldn't possibly understand."

"But it's such a little thing!"

"If I gave you that, I should indeed have nothing left. You would have all."

It was true that she could not in the least understand. But she knew she could not move him.

"Then promise me," she pleaded, "that you'll not try it until you are quite, quite well!"

"Oh, I promise you that!" he replied, with a grim smile.

"Thank you — Philip!"

Presently she arose, and looked down at him with a long, lingering gaze that seemed to be searching for something in his features.

"You'll take just what Jim gives you?" she asked anxiously.

"Of course."

"And not try to — boss him about the medicines and the food?"

"I promise to obey orders."

"And you'll be very careful?"

"Yes."

She moved slowly toward the door. But halfway there she stopped, and turned to look at him again. How could she leave him now? She couldn't! She couldn't! He was gazing away from her, out through the window. Wasn't he going to say a word to her — of farewell? She came back unsteadily, and stood behind his chair, her hands stretched out above his head. Then suddenly, impulsively, not touching him with her hands, she leaned down, and kissed his forehead.

"Good-by!" she said, her voice breaking.

"Good-by!" he answered gently, but without turning his head.

He heard the door opened and closed, very softly. After that he sat a long time in silence. Well, she was gone! It had been a trying afternoon, and he was glad to have it ended. And yet the room seemed to be extraordinarily empty, as it had never been before his illness. The stillness rather oppressed him. Damn it all, sickness did strange things to a man! Took a lot out of him! He straightened himself in his chair.

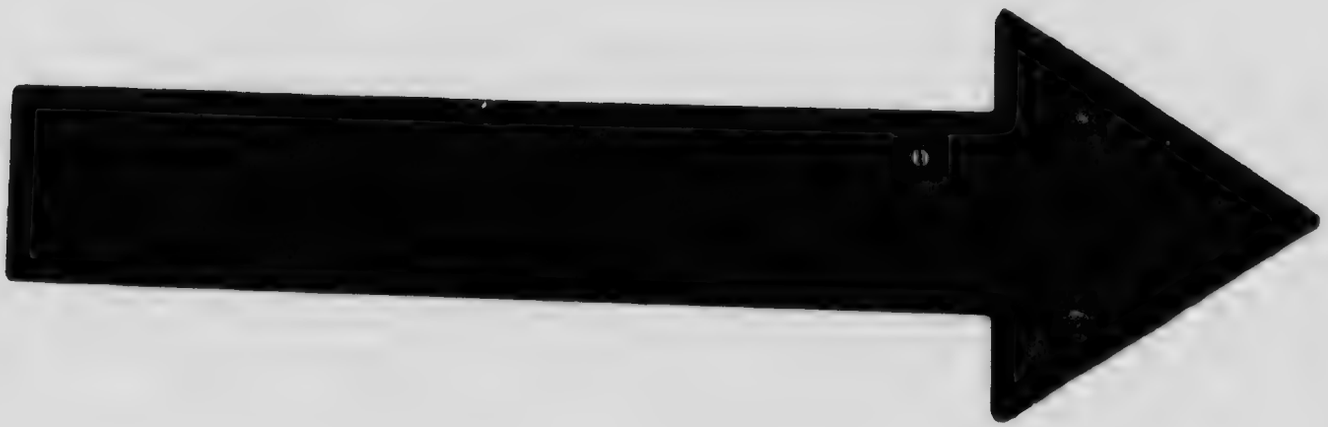
Presently Jim entered.

"Well, Jim!" said Haig. "Here we are again, eh? I'm hungry."

"You eat, she come back," Jim answered shrewdly.

Haig looked at him sharply, but the Chinaman's face was like a paper mask.

"Shut up!" he cried savagely.



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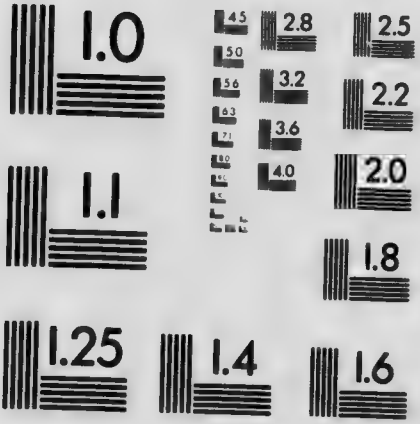

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CHAPTER XVI

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

HILLYER was waiting for her at the barn when she came at last, with a smile that eased his anxiety, if only in an inconsiderable degree. But he saw, as he took her handbag and bundle, and placed them in the automobile, that she had been crying. This gladdened while it angered him, and he was lost among the many interpretations that might be put upon those signs of distress. Had she come to the end of her infatuation? Had she been subjected to insults as the reward of her service? He dared not ask her such questions — not yet; but he was resolved (and there were material reasons, too, for that decision) to have his own case settled, one way or another, at once.

Neither of them spoke more than a conventional word or two until Hillyer, after full speed down Haig's road to the junction, slowed up on the main highway along the Brightwater. It was the serenest of summer evenings, very still and fragrant, with a touch of autumn in the air. The eastern sky was filled with pale golds and pinks, and the foothills were warm with purples. Marion's face was averted from Hillyer, and her eyes were fixed, not on the soft alternations of color in the sky, but on Thunder Mountain, where the only clouds to be seen in all the expanse of blue lay low upon its uncompromising head.

"Marion!" said Hillyer, at length.

She did not miss the note in his voice that exposed his intention, but long preparation for this moment enabled her to face him calmly.

"Yes, I know, Robert," she said. "You have much to say to me."

"I'm going to-morrow," he began abruptly. "Will you go with me?"

"To-morrow? Go with you?" she repeated, with a little start of surprise.

"Yes. Will you go with me?"

"But I don't understand, Robert."

"I must be in Denver the day after to-morrow."

"I — I didn't know your time was so short. I'm afraid — I've spoiled your visit."

"That doesn't matter, Marion, if you'll go back with me."

"But I can't — just yet."

"Why not?"

"I'm not ready. I haven't half finished my visit with Claire."

She was, after all, somewhat confused, for she had not expected him to approach the subject in just this way.

"But the summer is almost gone. It's near the end of August," persisted Hillyer.

"There's another month of good weather. And September, Claire says, is the most beautiful of all."

"That may be, unless Huntington's right. He told me only yesterday that it's going to be an early winter. There's come a chill in the air even since I've been here."

"Nonsense!" she replied, recovering her composure. "I'll go out with the last stage."

"And get caught in an avalanche or something!"

"I suppose Seth does want to get rid of me!" she said, with a faint laugh.

"That's not it at all."

"Well, I'm not afraid."

"But suppose you stay too late, and get caught. You'd have to remain here all winter. The Park, Huntington says, is as tight as a jail after the snows come."

"Claire stays here through the winter sometimes."

He felt a fresh alarm, and showed it. It would be just like her! he thought.

"See here, Marion!" he said, plunging at last. "I've obeyed your order not to say anything about — the future. I meant not to say anything until the time was up. But you must see I can't keep silent now, after — what's happened. You must know I can't go away and leave you without knowing what — it all means. You said you'd tell me as soon as you'd finished nursing — him. No, wait, please! Let me say it at once. You know I love you. I want you to marry me. I need you, Marion. There's never been an hour, a minute that I haven't thought of you. I can't work — I can't do anything without you. I love you more than —"

"Stop, Robert!" she cried. "You're making it harder for both of us."

"Harder — for — both of us?" he repeated slowly.

"Yes."

There was a moment's silence. Hillyer, while he

spoke, had half-consciously stopped the automobile, which stood now, humming softly, in the middle of the road that stretched white and empty ahead of them and behind them. The night breeze had risen, blowing cold from the snows, and the shadows were creeping down into the valley, as if they came from dark caverns in the hills.

"Robert," she said sadly. "It's no use. I must tell you. I — I can't marry you."

"Why?"

"You make me say it!" she cried. "Well, Robert, I — I don't love you."

"I'm not asking you to love me!" he rejoined, almost savagely. "I only ask you —"

"Listen!" she interrupted, placing a hand on his arm. "That's not all."

"You mean —"

She stopped him with a pressure on his arm.

"Once, not knowing, I almost consented," she went on. "But something checked me — held me back. You remember how restless I was — how troubled. You would have laughed at me if I had told you. But something seemed to be calling me — a voice from a long distance. I laughed at myself for a foolish girl — at first. I said it was nerves, and I fought against it. And it was then that I came nearest to saying yes to you, thinking that I was indeed foolish in holding back. I liked you. I've always liked you, Robert. You'd been such a splendid friend, and I was grateful. I wanted to repay you —"

She stopped suddenly, and a flush mounted swiftly into her pale cheeks. Repay! The word recalled

sharply to her, acutely and painfully, all that Haig had said about paying her. Were they, then, in the same dreadful situation, she and Haig, with debts they could never pay? For the first time some sense of the terrible finality of his decision struck in upon her secret hopes.

"Don't talk of that!" Robert was saying, seizing the moment of silence. "I never —"

"But always, when I was about to yield — I couldn't. I didn't know why then. But now I do."

"You mean — Haig?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes."

"You don't —" He could not bring himself to speak the word.

"Yes, Robert. I love him."

It took all the courage she possessed. But she owed it to him and to herself.

"I don't believe it!" he blurted out. "I won't believe it! You are not yourself, Marion. You are worn out. You have been fascinated. He's strange — different — new to you. It's your imagination, not your heart, that's been — won. He's led you on by —"

"No!" she broke in. "You're quite wrong. It's not his fault at all. He doesn't love me."

"Of course not. I know that kind of fellow. You didn't need to leave New York to find plenty like him. He only wants to —"

"Robert!" she cried warningly.

"Then what —"

"He hates me, I think," she replied sadly.

"Then why in the world do you —" He was floundering. "What do you know about him, anyhow? Who is he? Where did he come from?"

That sounded so much like Seth Huntington that she smiled, thinking of the picture that he must have drawn for Hillyer.

"I know very little about him," she replied quietly. "But I know that Cousin Seth is mistaken."

"But how do you know he hates you?"

"He made that clear in the beginning — not me alone, but all women. He shunned me. He told me twice that I must not speak to him again. And this afternoon, while you waited for me —" Her voice broke, with a laugh that was half a sob. "He — finished it."

"He was rude to you!" he cried. "I'll make him —"

She put her hand quickly on his arm.

"No. He was very gentle — and kind."

"What did he say?" Hillyer demanded, almost imperatively.

"He said that — he couldn't leave the ranch just now, so I'd better go back to New York — at once."

"He did, did he?" cried Hillyer angrily, his chivalry for the moment dominant. But then he saw suddenly another meaning, for him, in the brutal ultimatum; and his face brightened. "That settles it, doesn't it?" he exclaimed eagerly.

"Settles what?"

"Why, you'll go with me!"

"No."

"What do you mean?"

"I told you I'm not ready yet."

There was a silence while Hillyer, buoyed up with new hope, made some hurried calculations.

"Then listen, Marion!" he said. "I'll go to Denver, and come back in a week or ten days. I'll arrange things so that I can stay here until —"

"Oh, Robert! You won't understand."

He stared at her blankly.

"You're making it so hard for me!" she cried pathetically. "I've told you already that I cannot marry you."

"But why! Why!" he persisted.

"Because I haven't myself — I've nothing to give."

"But how can you love him after he has —"

"Told me he does not love me?" she said, taking the words from him. "Then how can you love me when I have said the same thing to you?"

He struggled desperately, in deep water.

"It's different, Marion. You don't hate me — I think. You say you like me. That's enough now — to start with. It's all I ask. I'll try to make you happy, and I'll wait for love. You shall have all the things in the world you want. I'm making scads of money. Everything I touch just rolls up into bank notes. I want you to come and spend all that money for me. Remember, Marion, your father wished it. If he were here now —"

"Yes!" she put in with sudden fire. "If he were here now do you know what he would say to me?"

He felt that he had blundered, and made no reply.

"He would say to me — Oh, I can hear him now! He would say: 'Follow your heart, daughter. Love's the only thing in the world that really counts.'"

She smiled triumphantly, but wistfully. And Hillyer was still silent.

"Daddy wasn't very good at quoting Scripture," she went on musingly, "but he used to say: 'Better a dinner of herbs where love is than a stalled ox and hatred therewith.'"

"But there isn't any hatred therewith!" cried Hillyer desperately. "I love you, Marion, and if you don't love me — you don't hate me. So there's more than half of it, and — can't we trust the future a little bit?"

"No."

"But what are you going to do?" he asked, shifting his line of attack.

"I don't know," she replied, with a helpless gesture.

"You can't go back to New York without money enough to take your proper place in the world. Of course, if you'll let me, I'll —

"Robert!" she interrupted sharply.

"Well, I mean it just the same!" he replied stoutly. "I've got to take care of you, and if you won't — See here, Marion! I simply refuse to be turned down this way. I'll not take your stubborn, whimsy little 'no' for my answer. You're on my hands, thank God! whether you like it or not. Maybe you won't love me. Maybe you won't marry me. We'll see about that! But I'm going to look after you — I'm going to take care of you, just the same — and you can just stop tightening those lips — they're not as red as they ought to be — and you can make up your mind that you can boss me so far and no farther."

Marion smiled at him indulgently, but gratefully, and even a little proudly; for she had been very proud of him in the days when only friendship was spoken of.

She did not in the least resent his speech; but neither did she answer him.

"It's getting late, Robert," she said, shivering a little.

"So it is," he replied. "And you've no warm wrap for the night air."

He drew the lap-robe around her, and started the automobile. Through the gathering night they drove, almost without speaking, to Huntington's, where the best supper that Claire could contrive from the limited stores at her disposal awaited the prodigal. There was naturally some constraint at table. Huntington had made his peace with Hillyer, having apologized humbly, and expatiated on the cause of his wrath. But he did not know how he stood with Marion, who had been a long time in the camp of the enemy, and who doubtless knew too of his speech about her trunks. He had not dared to ask Hillyer whether he had related that incident to her, and he felt the need of extreme discretion until he should discover what kind of a rod she had in pickle for him, or, at any rate, until the time should be propitious to tell her that he was sorry for his conduct. Marion was tired, and disinclined to talk, while Hillyer, on his side, had his mind fully occupied, between his deal in mines and his deal in love, in both of which he had encountered unexpected difficulties. Only Claire was gay and untroubled, and she accepted eagerly the task of saving the party from awkward silences. For once in many moons she was allowed to talk unchecked, and she made the most of her opportunity.

After supper, Marion announced her purpose to go to bed at once. She was sure, she declared, that she could sleep "around the clock."

"I'll be off before you're up, then," said Hillyer.

"You must go to-morrow?" asked Claire.

"Absolutely. It means thousands."

"Then we'll sit on the veranda a few minutes," said Marion. "Not long, though. I'm dreadfully sleepy."

It was not long. They found they had little to say to each other, since the one subject of which both were thinking, each from a different point of view, was tacitly barred. And Hillyer soon saw that Marion was sorely in need of rest.

"Go to bed now, dear girl!" he said presently. "And please take good care of yourself. I want to see the color back in your cheeks when I return."

"I will, Robert," she answered. "I'll be quite all right in a day or two."

"And you — don't really think of staying here all winter?" he ventured to ask diffidently.

"No," she replied. "That's hardly possible."

"Then good-by — until you hear my horn in the road down yonder."

"Good-by, Robert, and good luck!"

She gave him both her hands, for a moment, with a tenderness that lingered with him far on his way.

CHAPTER XVII

INTERLUDE

AUGUST ripened into September, and the Park underwent a subtle and fascinating change. In the meadows the hay lay in long windrows, golden green; on the slopes vermilion flowers succeeded blue; in the sunsets tender pinks yielded to burnt orange and vivid red. The nights had grown perceptibly colder, but the days were still warm and dry and radiant, though with a tang in the air that stirred the blood. And a thousand perfumes, known and unknown, distilled from meadow and field and forest, scented every vagrant breeze.

Marion was soon herself again, in body if not in mind. A few long nights of sleep, a few days in the saddle, and sufficient nourishment (for she had neglected herself at Haig's, despite Jim's solicitude) restored her physically to what she had been on the day of Haig's accident. But she, too, had changed, and as subtly as the season.

"What's come over Marion?" asked Huntington of Claire one day, after he had caught himself regarding her with the rapt interest of a discoverer.

Claire looked at him pityingly. She knew, but she was not going to tell him.

"Why?" she asked innocently.

"Well, I don't exactly know," he replied doubtfully.

"She's prettier than ever — but so are you. That isn't it. She's kind of — It's no use. I don't know."

Claire laughed, and then became severe.

"That's because she's forgiven you," she said.

"No, it isn't!" he asseverated not without embarrassment. "You can see for yourself that she's different."

"Very well!" she retorted maliciously. "Perhaps if you'd done such a noble thing as nursing Haig back to life you'd be different too."

"I'd see him in —"

"Shame!" she cried. "You wouldn't do anything of the kind. Your bark's worse than your bite, sir. And besides, while I think of it, you really must stop saying 'hell' and 'damn' so much. The habit's growing on you."

Having no ready answer to that speech, he merely looked at her, perhaps a little guiltily, then bent down and kissed her, and hurried out of the house. He was, in truth, though he never would have had the courage to acknowledge it, even to Claire, ashamed of himself, and anxious too. His inflammable temper had rather outflamed itself in its last-recorded performance, and he had begun to suspect that it had been responsible for some, though by no means all, of his troubles. The killing of Haig's bull, he now realized, was a foolish and indefensible act, which could be traced easily to him because of the bull that was gored; and he must prepare to account to Haig for it. And so, knowing that he would again be in the wrong, as in the affair at the postoffice, he was torn between accentuated bitterness

toward Haig and growing discontent with himself. He would never be afraid of Haig, but he was becoming steadily more afraid of Marion. Whether it was that he had really developed intuition, which told him of Marion's spiritual growth, or that he was in constant dread lest she make some new demand upon him in regard to Haig, he lived in much awe of her. She had once spoken, on a memorable occasion, of making peace between Haig and himself. It would be just like her, wouldn't it, to try to bring them together? Well, let her try it! He would be the last man in Paradise Park. And so on, until he was once more almost satisfied with himself.

The faithful Smythe, meanwhile, brought Marion almost daily news of Philip. That he was rapidly recovering she heard with a ringing joy, which had its alloy of fear; for she knew that the day he felt himself to be in full possession of his powers he would attempt again to conquer Sunnysides. So from day to day her apprehension mounted until it became well-nigh insupportable. And her own helplessness maddened her. What could she do? Nothing! Nothing but wait, and pray God to protect him. Every night she prayed for him, and every morning, on her knees; and every hour the prayer was in her heart. She rode sometimes as far as the farther edge of the woods that crowned the ridge, and looked long at the little valley, and at the smoke rising in a thin spiral from the ranch house that she could not see. At the right of it would be the cottage, and at the left the barn, and the corral where Sunnysides bided his time. And then, having looked until she could endure no more, she would ride slowly

home, to await the next coming of Smythe with news.

Once she went to the glade of the columbines. She did not feel any longer the antipathy she once felt to the spot that had, in one devastating moment, revealed to her the fatuity of her dreams. Now she was in search of the old hopes that she had once revelled in, while she gathered arm-loads of columbines, and imagined they were for Philip.

Dismounting eagerly at the foot of the little hill, she plunged through the brush, and halted at the margin of the glade, stricken with the keenest disappointment. The columbines were gone; only a brave, pale blossom here and there lingered pathetically in a waste of dried and drooping stems. She stood staring at them a moment; then, with a cry, she threw herself down among them, and gave herself up to grief, letting the tears come in what flood they would, while her hand clutched one poor survivor of the summer glory.

Gone, then, like the summer, were all those dreams. And very soon must come the end of all. Barely two weeks remained to her in the Park,— barely two weeks in which the miracle that she awaited could be wrought. What miracle could move him when her love had failed? And yet — Once, in her desperation, she suggested to Claire and Seth that she should remain all winter in the Park; but they rose up together against any such scheme. It was absurd, they agreed. They would be delighted to have her with them as many summers as she might wish; and they were already counting on her return to them next June. But the Park in winter was no place for a woman, unless she had been long inured to such hardships as were involved in that hibernation.

Claire had remained two winters there, it was true, but Seth had vowed that she should never miss the last stage again. Marion's proposal only clinched the matter the more firmly; and it was eventually agreed that Claire should go with Marion to New York, where they would live very quietly, taking what pleasures their means would permit, until spring should bring them back to the mountains. And so, barring a miracle, she was at the end of her hopes.

Meanwhile, she had heard from Robert. He was nearly wild, he wrote. The big deal was going slowly — not badly, but with maddening delays. He was tempted to "chuck the whole business," though it meant thousands, perhaps half a million. Yet how could he do that? He was working for her; and if he left Denver the deal would certainly fall through. But there was yet time; any day the stubborn partner might yield; and so on. Poor Robert! thought Marion. She imagined what Philip would have done if he had wanted her as Robert did. Would any deal, any prospect of millions, have kept him away from her? So she reasoned, forgetting entirely the other side of the case. Haig, if she could have asked him, would have told her: yes, that's all very well, but the man would have to get those thousands or other thousands afterwards, just the same; a woman wants to have her cake and eat it too; and so much the worse for the man if he cannot dance attendance on her and make money for her at the same time!

She wrote to Robert that he must not think of leaving his business. Moreover, she would soon be in Denver, on her way back home.

In the late afternoon Haig leaned against Sunnysides' corral, smoking his pipe and gazing fixedly at the golden outlaw. The air was very still, almost too still, as if nature had paused before a sudden and violent alteration of her mood. In the bright sky, a little hard even for September, there was no cloud, except on the western horizon, where dark vapors hovered over the bald head of Thunder Mountain. The scent of the harvest in the meadows blended with the odor of burning pine that came from the ranch house, where Flick built the fire for supper. On the hill the pines were still, but the brook babbled on, and there was an incessant low twittering of birds in the cottonwoods.

Haig had now fully recovered. He had taken to his horse again some days before, to ride a little the first day, and more the next, each day adding something to his exercise, until he felt the blood running warmly in his veins, and his muscles tightening at his will. Then he had hardened himself with every kind of labor around the ranch. For he was impatient to remove the stigma of doubt that Sunnysides had burned into his soul. He had told Marion that she was incapable of understanding why he must conquer Sunnysides. He was not sure that he understood it himself. But he knew that he must. Ever since that day when he had fled into the world he had fought to be master of himself; and his way of being master of himself was to be master of every man and every animal and every obstacle that appeared across his path,— that irresponsible, uncharted path that had neither beginning nor end, that led he knew not where nor cared. Every moment was a moment to itself, and every day was its own if he had done

what he had set out to do. His one purpose in life was not to be beaten, never to fail, though he should throw away to-morrow what he had won to-day. So it was that to conquer Sunnysides was for the moment the one thing that counted, and he would have no rest until it was done.

Twilight settled down upon the valley. Haig's pipe went out, and still he stood gazing at Sunnysides. In the dusk the horse glowed like a living jewel that holds the light when the sun has gone. Night fell, and the golden hide became a shimmer in the dark, as the outlaw moved restlessly to and fro in his prison. Then, of a sudden, with the unexpectedness and unreason of a dog's wolf-howl at the rising moon, there rose from the gloom of the corral a shrill, wild neigh that shattered the peaceful silence of the night.

Haig left the fence, and walked swiftly to the barn.

"Farrish!" he said shortly. "We'll break Sunnysides to-morrow. Tell Pete and Curly not to ride away in the morning. The cattle can wait."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CHALLENGE OF THE BRUTE

THERE had been yellow, mellow weather for weeks on weeks, but this day dawned hard and cold. Some projected rancor of the winter was in the air. Westward the peaks were blanketed with thick gray clouds, while eastward a sullen redness showed where the sun strove to rise on an angry world. The wind was the kind that scrapes raw the nerves, buffeting man and beast with cross-currents and unexpected blasts, howling and shrieking around chimneys and gables, covering everything with dust and sand.

Haig awoke to hear the wind tearing at the shutters and the roof, the pines on the hillside thundering like surf, the hills reverberating with the maddest trumpetings. He lay a moment listening; his pulse quickened at the sound of all that tumult; and he leaped from his bed calling loudly for Slim Jim. It was a day for battle. The very elements were up and at it, as if all nature had enlisted in the struggle between man and brute.

For all his eagerness, he ate his breakfast leisurely, resolved to make no such error as he had made before. There should be no mad haste and no anger; no working on an empty stomach, on nerves drawn taut. Bacon and eggs and buckwheat cakes, with coffee and a single

pipe, occupied an hour or more; and then, feeling fit for anything, he set out for the corrals.

He did not scruple this time to take every precaution known to the experts of the corrals. Bill was mounted on the wisest horse in the stables, with a lariat ready against the event of Sunnysides trying the fence again. Then Haig directed Farrish, Curly, and Pete to rope and saddle the outlaw, saving himself for the supreme struggle. But to their astonishment there was none of the difficulties in the preliminaries that they encountered on the previous occasion; only two or three vicious movements, no more.

"Foxy, ain't you?" said Farrish to the outlaw, when the saddle was on. "Savin' yourself, are you, you yellow devil?"

The horse was led as before into the larger corral. He stepped nimbly, obediently, as if resistance were the farthest thing from his thoughts, even when Haig, his arch-enemy, walked up to him, grasped the bridle, and looked steadily into his eyes. For a moment all stood still, as the challenge passed between man and brute. Then Haig tested the cinches of the saddle, looked carefully around him, and disposed the men with a final word to each.

"Now then! Off with it!"

Farrish removed the last rope, and then only the bridle rein in Haig's hand, and the fence yonder, stoutly repaired since the last battle, remained between Sunnysides and the sand-hills of the San Luis. True, only a fence and a guard had held him all these weeks of his captivity, but that fence had been built up, on his arrival, two planks higher than the one in which he now

found himself again, and from which he had all but escaped at the first opportunity.

Haig put his feet cautiously into the stirrup, and sprang into the saddle. He was prepared for a repetition of the trick that had almost cost him his life, and ready to swing himself out of the saddle if Sunnysides should go over backward again. But the horse was indeed "foxy"; one would have said that he knew his man, and would waste no time or energy on manœuvers that his enemy had discounted. For some seconds he stood quite motionless, while Haig settled firmly in his seat, and gripped the bridle rein expectantly. At length the horse lifted and turned his head, and looked, as it appeared, toward the western mountains, half hidden in the gray swirl of clouds.

"Yes, over there's the San Luis," muttered Haig. "But it's a long way, and you're not going."

Farrish grinned. But Pete stood like a wooden Indian, so still and intent was he, with his black eyes fixed on the outlaw. Curly loosened the coils of the lariat in his hands. In a corner of the corral Bill, mounted and watchful, held his rope ready for a throw.

Still Sunnysides did not move. But his tail swished with the slow and menacing movement of a tiger's, and there was just a quiver of muscles under his golden hide.

"Watch out!" called Pete.

And then it came. The horse bounded into the air, and came down stiff-legged, with a jolt that Haig felt in every bone. Then he leaped sideways half a dozen feet, and Haig was flung far over, hanging perilously in the saddle. With almost one motion the horse was in

the air again, to come down with the same frightful, jarring shock. Instantly thereupon he lunged forward, stopped short, ducked his head, and narrowly missed hurling Haig like a stone from a catapult.

All these tactics were repeated with variations; and then, of a sudden, as if he thought Haig had forgotten his experience by this time, he reared, and with the same lightning swiftness as before, went over backward on the ground. But Haig was too quick for him. He swung himself to one side, released his right foot from the stirrup, and rolled away from beneath the horse as they came down with a crash. At the same instant Pete and Curly rushed in, and the horse leaped to his feet only to be brought down again with two ropes on his legs.

Haig, dusty but uninjured, was on his feet in a jiffy, and leaning over the thwarted outlaw.

"You didn't really think you could do it again, did you?" he said.

"But he's a hellyun, though, ain't he!" ejaculated Curly, bracing himself on his rope.

The horse was allowed to rise; Haig climbed cautiously into the saddle once more; and the same tense silence as the first ensued, while Sunnysides waited, as if for inspiration.

Then it was on as before, but with accentuated fury. The horse, for his opening demonstration, bucked with his back curved like a steel bow. Haig was almost propelled into the air, but hung on desperately; and as the outlaw came down on stiffened legs Haig jabbed the spurs viciously into his flanks. For Sunnysides had been too calculating in his measures; it was desirable to

stir him up, to anger him, to torment him until he should wear himself out with his furious struggles.

The spurs did it. In an instant Sunnysides was a demon. All that he had done was like the antics of a colt compared with what followed. No eye in the corral could follow and record all his movements. He was in every part of the enclosure at once, it seemed. There were instants, too, when he appeared to have dissociated himself from the earth, and to have taken to the air as his element. And then the earth rang again with the clatter of his hoofs; his four legs became a hundred, and then were four again, pounding like pile-drivers, like steel drills. He flung himself against the fence until it swayed and creaked, and Haig's legs were bruised by the violent contact. Clouds of dust rose and hung above the enclosure, and settled on the outlaw's wet shoulders, on Haig's sweating face, in his eyes and nostrils, and in his throat until he was fairly choking. But though half-blinded, dizzy, and aching in all his body, Haig hung on, and dug the spurs ceaselessly into the horse's flanks.

"God! He's got him!" cried Farrish.

"Your game's up!" yelled Curly tauntingly, dancing with joy in his corner of the corral.

But the game was not up. Curly's words were barely out of his mouth when something went wrong with Haig. Just what happened none could be quite sure of, then or afterward; but in the midst of Sunnysides' plungings, there came a windmill kind of movement, rather like the whirling of a dervish, out of which the horse lunged swiftly forward, and halted violently, with his head down, and his forelegs stiff before him. It was ap-

parently an elaboration of one of the commonest tricks of all; and if Haig could have stuck to the saddle then he probably would have won. But he was thrown. He went sprawling over the horse's lowered head, and struck the ground on his head and shoulders, and lay still.

What followed was more marvelous even than the unseating of Haig with the shout of victory already rising to his lips. There came a snort that ended in a scream; and then a flash of yellow through the dust. Bill Craven, on his horse at one side of the corral, saw it coming straight toward him, and tried to whirl his noose. Too late. The outlaw was upon him; his own pony, rearing, was caught unbalanced; and Bill himself instinctively leaned backward in the saddle. There was a terrific impact; the pony was struck squarely on the left fore-quarter; and horse and rider went down together in a heap against the fence. Then over them went the outlaw, trampling them as he leaped and clambered, taking the top plank with him as he landed outside the corral on his head and knees. In an instant he was up; in another, or the same instant, he was off, with his head down, and belly to earth, with the speed of a race-horse and the frenzy of a wild thing set free.

Haig was only slightly stunned by the fall. He heard, though he did not see, the escape of Sunnysides; and for one black moment all in the present was blotted out. But that was only the dizziness, and the reeling pain in his head; and there was the sky filled with gray-black, contending clouds; and Pete was leaning over him.

"Hurt?" asked the Indian.

"No."

He reached up one hand, and Pete helped him to his feet. Swaying a little, he looked around the corral. Farrish was on the outside, gazing down the road where Sunnysides was now almost out of sight, a mere yellow spot in a cloud of dust. Curly was jerking Craven's horse to its feet.

"What's the matter there?" called Haig.

"Bill's hurt!" answered Curly.

With Pete at his side, not yet assured that all was well with him, Haig walked unsteadily to where Bill lay against the fence.

"What is it, Craven?" he asked.

"Leg broke. My horse fell on me," Bill answered weakly. He had, besides, a gash in the left side of his head, from which the blood flowed down his face.

"Into the barn with him!" Haig ordered quietly.

They placed him on a cot, and Pete gave him a long pull at his ever-re. flask.

"I'm sorry, Bill," said Haig, looking down at him.

"It's my own fault," replied Craven. "An' it serves me damned right for lettin' him get by me."

Haig smiled grimly, then turned to the other men with orders. He was ominously quiet; even the dullest of them, the slow-witted Curly, saw and wondered at the unusual calm that showed on his face and in his accents.

"Now then, business!" he said, with swift decision. "You'll take the sorrels, Curly, and drive to Tellurium for the doctor. Don't be afraid to drive them; I'll not be on your back for that. Pete, go to the cottage, and bring my gun. Jim knows where it is. Farrish — where's Farrish?"

"Here!"

He came leading two ponies from their stalls.

"What are you doing, Farrish?"

"I supposed we'd better find out where he's gone, and see if —"

"There's no doubt where he's headed for, is there?" Haig interrupted. "And who's going to stop him? No, saddle Trixy!"

"But you're not going alone?" said Farrish.

"Yes."

"But —"

"Bill's knocked out. Curly's off as soon as he can start for Tellurium. That leaves you and Pete to look after the ranch. I may be gone some time."

"But you can't rope him alone!" protested Farrish.

"I don't expect to. There isn't a horse in the Park that could overtake him. He'll make for the S. Luis, of course. I'll get help there. Now then, Farrish, you're in charge of the ranch. If anything should happen to me, Jim knows where all my papers are. That's all."

Farrish hastened to saddle Trixy, coiling a rope at the saddle horn, and strapping a slicker behind the saddle. At this moment came Pete from the cottage, bringing the revolver and cartridge belt, which Haig buckled on while Farrish led Trixy out in front of the stable.

There was a word or two more to Farrish, about the cattle and the hay, and Haig swung himself into the saddle.

"Wait!" cried Pete, running out of the stable.

He handed a flask of whisky to Haig, who took it, smiling, and thrust it into a pocket of his coat.

"Sure cure for everything, eh, Pete?"

But he reached down, and clasped Pete's hand.

"You will be cold, maybe," said the Indian simply.

"All right, men!" said Haig. "You'll take good care of Craven, of course. And you'll use your best judgment about everything, Farrish. I'm not coming back without Sunnysides."

He put spurs to the little bay mare, and dashed away. Pete and Farrish stood watching him until he had turned the point of the ridge.

"Hell!" said Farrish.

In the cottage door stood a figure in blue silks, intently gazing after the disappearing horseman.

"He catchum, allee light!" murmured Slim Jim.

CHAPTER XIX

SMYTHE'S LAST BUDGET

SETH had heard at the post-office that the deer were coming down unusually early from their summer haunts high in the mountains. A fine herd had been seen just above Bratner's, and Seth proposed to Marion that she should have a try at them. They would start early in the morning, stop the night at Bratner's, and be back home late the second evening. Marion reluctantly consented, and before going to bed that night she laid out woolen underwear, her stoutest riding costume, with divided skirts and knickerbockers and tan boots lacing almost to her knees. She did not want to go, but, as more than once before, she yielded to Seth's insistence rather than attempt an explanation.

That night, however, summer departed from the Park. A dry storm descended on the valley, and Marion lay awake while the wind howled around the corners of the ranch house, of which every timber seemed to be crying out in agony. She knew that high among the rocks the storm was smashing about in fury, and even in its sheltered hollow the house was hammered as if the elements were bent upon its annihilation. When each prodigious outcry had spent itself and died away there was still the moaning and fretting and troubled whimpering that reminded her of the plaints of an invalid pleading for help between paroxysms of pain. She was strangely de-

pressed by it, unaccountably distressed, and was glad when the first faint whitening of the window curtains told her of the dawn. She arose and dressed — after a moment's hesitation — in the costume she had prepared the night before. Seth surely would not insist on the shooting trip in such weather, she thought, but it would please him to see her dressed for it. Besides, the temperature of her room reminded her that she would need warm clothes if she went out anywhere on such a day.

"Good, Marion!" cried Seth sure enough, when he saw her at the breakfast table. "Glad you're not discouraged by a little wind."

"But — you don't mean to go on a day like this?"

"Why not?"

"The wind, and — we'll get soaking wet."

"No, it's only a wind storm, and this is the tail end of it. The sun'll be out in a couple of hours. We needn't start in a hurry. We'll leave the horses as they are — they're all ready, bundles and the rest — until we see."

Seth's optimism annoyed her, but she felt encouraged when, after breakfast, she stepped out on the veranda and met the cold and quarrelsome day. A rough blast struck her in the face; she saw a ragged drift of clouds torn by the wind; and the whole landscape seemed to have undergone a melancholy change. Dispirited beyond measure, despite the one satisfaction that the weather gave, she re-entered the house, and sank uneasily into an armchair by the fire.

But Seth's prediction was justified. Toward ten o'clock the wind ceased, and patches of blue began to

show in the blanket of gray. Claire shared Marion's disinclination to go shooting on such a day (or any other kind of a day, for her part!), and they stood at the window actually deploring the blue rents in the clouds, when Marion uttered a sharp exclamation of surprise.

"Smythe!" she gasped.

"On a day like this!" cried Claire.

He had dismounted quickly, and was walking toward the house; and as he neared the steps Marion saw in his face what caused her to press her hand on her bosom to still her heart. Something had happened! And she had known it all the time — had known it even in her sleep!

Claire ran to the door and opened it.

"Well, Mr. Smythe!" she cried. "You're just in time to cheer us up. We're deep in the mulligrubs."

He entered smiling, removing his sombrero with his customary flourish. But as he advanced he shot a swift, keen look at Marion.

"Something's happened!" she repeated to herself.

But she came forward with a smile, and shook hands with Smythe, searching his face. And he was warning her again. She could have shrieked with impatience and anxiety, but she held herself, and waited.

"A terrible night, wasn't it?" said Claire, giving Smythe a chair.

"Terrific!" replied he. "You know the big pine that hung over the road just this side of Toumine's? Well, it's down, right across the road. I had to ride around it, up among the underbrush."

"I didn't sleep at all, and I'm used to winds, too," said Claire.

"It got me up at daylight," Smythe went on. "It didn't look like much of a day for riding, but I got nervous sitting around listening to my good landlady — one of the young Martins is threatened with something or other — and started out to see how the landscape had been changed. There are trees down everywhere, and —" He paused. "What are you doing this morning, Miss Gaylord?" he asked, very casually.

She had been silent, watching him.

"We were going shooting, but we've been waiting to see if the weather would change."

"Then you haven't been out?"

"Only on the veranda for a minute."

"Let's take a brisk walk, then. It'll do you good — warm you up a little."

"Yes," she said weakly.

She went to her room for her hat, and pinning it on before the mirror, started at sight of her face, which had grown very white. She was almost incapable of thought. The hatpin slipped from her cold fingers, and fell to the floor. She stared at it strangely before stooping to pick it up. How could she bear to hear what Smythe had come to tell her! But it was good of him to wait until he could tell her alone.

"Will you go too, Mrs. Huntington?" Smythe said, as Marion emerged from her room.

Claire looked at Marion, and wondered at the whiteness of her face, and the haunted look in her eyes. Nothing had been said, but she saw there was something.

"No, thank you!" she said promptly. "The house suits me this morning."

Smythe and Marion walked up the hill toward the tree where Marion had practised shooting. Until they reached it neither spoke.

"Well?" said Marion, turning suddenly on him.

"Sunnysides has got away."

"And he?" she cried.

"Thrown, but not hurt."

She stared at him a moment, dazed. Then she threw back her head, and clasped her hands on her breast.

"Oh!" she murmured. "But how you frightened me!"

Smythe looked at her silently; and presently, when she lowered her eyes, she saw that his face was very grave. But Haig was unhurt, and Sunnysides had escaped. She had prayed for just that.

"What is it?" she cried, leaning forward to clutch his arm.

"He's following."

"Following?"

"Yes. Alone."

"Where?"

"Yonder."

He pointed to the west.

"To the San Luis?"

"Yes."

"The way they brought him here?"

"No. Sunnysides has taken the trail over Thunder Mountain."

Her hand fell from his arm. She swayed, as if she would collapse. Smythe grabbed her, with an arm around her waist, and led her, unresisting and dumb, to a near rock, where he seated her gently, and stood watch-

ing her. He had been too abrupt, he thought; but how else could he have told her?

She struggled bravely.

"Tell me!" she said at length.

He knew little about the event at the ranch. There had been a terrific struggle; Haig had almost conquered; then the outlaw had flung him over his head, trampled one of his men, breaking his leg, and leaped the fence to liberty.

"But — Thunder Mountain?" cried Marion.

"That's the strangest part of it," Smythe replied. "Even Haig refused at first to believe it. Nobody knows whether it was deliberate or accidental. It seems that 'Red' Davis, who works for Toumine, was taking a load of hay to Lake Cobalt. He'd stopped just beyond the junction of the main road and Haig's to fix the harness or something, when he heard a furious galloping in Haig's road. He looked — and Sunnysides must have been something worth seeing, as he came storming down on the boy, with red eyes and foaming lips, the bridle reins dangling at his knees, and the stirrups flying. 'Red' had never seen him, but he'd heard a lot, and he jumped behind the wagon as if the devil was after him. But the clatter of hoofs ceased suddenly, and the boy peered around the hay to see what had happened. There was Sunnysides, just at the junction, with his head high, snorting and sniffing, first in the direction of the wagon, and then the other way up the road. With a characteristic boyish burst of daring or deviltry, 'Red' leaped out from his shelter, and yelled. The horse leaped into the air, let out a wild neigh, and bolted up the road toward the post-office.

"'Red' watched him until he had disappeared, and then drove on. It must have been half an hour later that he heard more mad galloping behind him. He turned to look, and there came Haig, riding like all fury.

"'Have you seen a horse?' he yelled as he reined up alongside the wagon.

"'Well I just guess!' said the boy. 'Sunnysides. How did he — ?'

"'How was the saddle — loose or not?' asked Haig.

"'No, it hadn't turned — if that's what —'

"'Thank you!' replied Haig, starting on.

"'Wait!' the boy shouted. 'He ain't gone that way!'

"'What?'

"'I say, he ain't gone that way.'

"Haig stared at him suspiciously. Was the boy trying to trick him, in emulation of his elders? He was about to ride on, disdaining to heed him, when something in the boy's honest face struck his attention.

"'Are you dreaming?' he cried.

"'No, I ain't!' retorted Davis, deeply offended.

"'Where did he go then?' demanded Haig.

"'Yander,' answered 'Red.'

"Haig was incredulous.

"'It's the truth!' protested the boy. And then he told Haig what he had seen.

"'But how in hell —' Haig began.

"Then suddenly it came to him.

"'Thunder Mountain!' he cried. Then, half to himself: 'The trail drops down from Thunder Mountain — somewhere — into the Black Lake country, and

then — over the Sangre de Cristo is the San Luis. *But how does he know that?'*

"'He knows a lot, he does!' said 'Red.'

"Then Haig was off, flinging back 'Thank you!' at the boy. But he took the precaution to confirm 'Red's' story at the post-office. Thompson himself had seen Sunnysides, still going like the wind. Tom Banks came in a little later with news of the outlaw well up the road toward Norton's, and Haig after him. So there's no doubt the way they've gone. But it's a losing game if Sunnysides can keep up the speed he was hitting when he was last seen."

"A losing game!" She, better than anybody else in the Park, knew what that meant. She rose slowly, and looked across the Park at Thunder Mountain, now lost among the clouds. No, not quite; for through a rift she was just able to make out the timber line on the mountain's jutting shoulder. Above that she knew the bleak rocks rose sheer to the bald head that was battered by tempests, seared by lightning, swept smooth by the winds that never ceased.

So this was the message! This was what Thunder Mountain had said to her! This was the answer to her questions! Day after day she had studied it, when storms gathered on that frowning head, when vapors made a smudge there in the midst of the glittering assemblage of the peaks, and when, for a meager hour, once in a while, the summit stood clear in the sunshine, as if the tortured mountain, condemned to everlasting punishment, had been given a brief reprieve.

Now, at last, she understood. Somewhere on that evil trail was Philip. He could never cross Thunder

Mountain! Sunnysides might, perhaps; but he — he had tried, and failed. Others had tried, and — died for it. But he would try again; she knew how desperately he would throw himself upon that fatal head. And then? It was the end!

But she must know. She could not stay there.

She started down the hill, running; and Smythe followed her in amazement and alarm. He did not like that last look on her face.

"Wait!" he called, in a voice that for once rang with authority.

She stopped, and let him overtake her.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"I'm going to Murray's — for news," she answered.

"No!" he cried. "That's madness."

"It's necessary," she rejoined. "And there's no danger."

"How do you know?"

"I met Mrs. Murray once at the post-office. She talked to me about Murray's ranch — it's in a gulch just below timber line. She asked me to come and visit her — and I'm going."

"Then I'll go with you!" retorted Smythe.

She looked at him intently, and smiled in a way that puzzled and disturbed him. But before he could make any considerable effort to analyze it, the smile had fled, and he was following Marion helplessly down the hill.

At the steps of the veranda she paused, and waited for him.

"I'll be out in a minute," she said; and left him seating himself uneasily, his perplexity plainly showing in his face.

Marion opened the door, and faltered on the threshold. Seth was there with Claire; and she must face them both.

"Mr. Smythe wants me to go for a ride with him," she said, advancing smilingly. "We can start to-morrow on the shooting trip, can't we, Cousin Seth?"

She had not often called him "Cousin Seth" of late; and he was delighted.

"Well," he said reflectively, "I'd rather planned starting to-day, but if to-morrow suits you better it's all right, Marion. Go along with your young man!"

Claire was studying her anxiously, and Marion hastened to disarm her.

"Thank you, Seth!" she said. "You see, I'm not feeling quite myself this morning — such a night I had! A short ride will be about all I'm good for. I'll feel better to-morrow."

"Well, then, dear," said Claire, "you'll not be gone long, will you?"

"Don't worry!" was the evasive reply. "Mr. Smythe will take good care of me."

On that she kissed Claire, nodded brightly to Huntington, and hurried away. Almost running in her eagerness, she led the way to the stable, where two horses stood saddled, with rifles in leather cases hanging from the saddlebows, and bundles strapped behind. Smythe started to remove the gun from Tuesday's saddle.

"No, leave it there!" commanded Marion.

"Certainly. But why?" asked Smythe.

"I don't know," she replied. "It just occurred to me."

"But the bundle? You won't need that."

"No. But yes — leave it! It's not very big."

Smythe looked at her keenly, and with a vague suspicion; but there was no confusion in her face or manner. She was, in fact, not thinking of the bundle or the gun; or if she thought of them — Such rigid instruments as words, worn blunt with usage and misuse, are quite inadequate to describe the faint and fugitive character of that thought,— the idea still in its inception, inchoate, embryo. She was going to Murray's for news of Philip Haig; and all beyond that purpose was — beyond.

Smythe was not satisfied, but he could say no more; for Marion was already mounting Tuesday, and he could only follow.

At the edge of the little wood below the ranch house Marion turned in the saddle, and saw Claire standing in the doorway. She waved her hand, and Claire waved hers in response; and then the trees came between them, as they had done a hundred times that summer. But now a lump rose in Marion's throat. Dear Claire! She had been so good to her!

They emerged from the woods, and Marion spurred Tuesday to the gallop, and Smythe came galloping behind. For some distance down the valley she made a point of keeping well ahead of him, by this means avoiding conversation, for which she was not prepared. Her eyes continually sought the dark, gaunt mass of rock that was then, little by little, breaking through the reek on Thunder Mountain. Philip would be up there soon. He had — how many hours the start of her? She checked Tuesday's gait, and let Smythe come up beside her.

"What time was it when he passed the post-office?" she asked.

"About eight o'clock."

And now it was almost noon! She spurred her pony on.

They turned the corner at Thompson's, galloping, and caught a glimpse of Mrs. Thompson in the doorway, with a look of wonder on her face. Two miles beyond they swerved without lessening their speed into a less-traveled road that presently was winding in and out among the timber, which opened at the end of another mile, and showed them Norton's ranch in its sheltered valley among the foothills. It was from Norton's, or near it, that the last word had come of Haig and Sunnysides; so there was no need to stop for confirmation of their direction. The valley narrowed to a gulch, and the forest came down on either side, and the road ahead of them was swallowed up in shade.

Here, as if at the entrance to some unknown (for she had never been past Norton's, in all her rides about the Park), her purpose required that Marion should rid herself of Smythe. Moreover, there was Claire to be thought of; and she did not want Huntington to be riding up the trail after her that night.

"Now, Mr. Smythe," she said, reining up in the first shadow of the woods, "I've something for you to do for me."

"What is it?" he asked in surprise.

"I want you to leave me now, and take a message to Mrs. Huntington."

"But I can't — leave you."

"Yes, you must."

"But you're not going on alone!"

"I'm not afraid. I've got my rifle. Besides, I'll be at Murray's before dark, and there, as you know, I shall be in good hands. But Claire will worry unless she knows where I am."

"She'll worry just the same."

"No. She knows Mrs. Murray very well."

"But —"

"Good-by, Mr. Smythe!"

She reached her hand to him, and he took it reluctantly.

"It's all wrong, Miss Gaylord!" he protested. "I'm convinced that I'm acting like a fool. If anything happens to you, I'll —"

"Nothing will happen to me. Good-by!"

Smythe watched her until she was swallowed up by the woods; he looked at the pines piling up to the distant crests of the mountains, mass on mass, and solitude enfolding deeper solitude; he listened to the long, low, rolling murmur of the forest, sweet but menacing. Then, with the inward comment that he was several kinds of a blithering idiot, he turned and rode back toward the Park, evolving various interesting but futile theories to explain the fact that he, a man of undoubted intelligence, had always acted the part of the giddy fool in moments of emergency. And there was Huntington — another fool! He could foresee a pretty dialogue between them.

CHAPTER XX

"THE TRAIL HELD TRUE"

THE forest enveloped her, but she sheltered herself in its heart, and was glad of its soothing silence. The wind had died down to a rustling murmur in the highest foliage; through rifts in the dark-green canopy she caught glimpses of a cool blue sky; and there was a rooty sweetness in the air.

Mile by mile the road, a mere track traveled by Murray's team at long intervals, grew rougher and more difficult. Soon it had abandoned the easy grades of the gulch, and climbed steep mountain sides, in a devious course through heavy timber, dropping to tumbling rivulets, climbing again to hang on the edges of high cliffs, dodging here and there among massive, outjutting rocks. Four hours she rode thus, mounting, ever mounting, with glimpses now and then of the forests massed green-black below, and glimpses even of the Park itself, around the shoulder of a hill,— a patch of green and violet bright with sunshine. And then, when weariness had begun to weigh upon her, and as the shadows of the forest turned to glooms, she saw with a thrill of expectation that the road dipped ahead of her into a little gulch that lay hidden away in a cleft of the mountains. She must surely be near her destination now; and sure enough, she was riding presently along the bank of a roaring stream; beyond her was a

small meadow of a brilliant green, and at the far edge of it a log cabin, with friendly smoke curling from the chimney.

But she was surprised and disappointed. She had expected, on reaching Murray's, to see the stark head of Thunder Mountain towering above it, near and sheer. It was nowhere visible; not even the silvery peaks, its neighbors, were to be seen; there were only forests heaped on forests to the sky line. The trail, then, must be longer than she thought; and she seemed to be no closer to him than when she had studied the bald head of the mountain through the clouds.

She was welcomed by Mrs. Murray with cordiality, but in some surprise. A stout and jovial person, whose spirits appeared not to have been lowered in the least degree by the loneliness of her surroundings, Mrs. Murray was a helpful hostess to Marion, who was by now in a state of deep dejection. A little boy and his smaller sister, both very dirty but rugged and red-cheeked, played in the open space before the cabin. The week's washing was on the line, and from behind it, at the sound of a horse's hoof beats, came Mrs. Murray, staring in amazement. Wonders on wonders in that solitude, where nothing ever happened! First a runaway horse of unheard-of color, saddled and bridled, dashing past the cabin, and almost trampling the children at their play; then Philip Haig, with his set face and burning eyes, making inquiries, and asking for a bite to eat; and then —

"Well! If it ain't Miss Gaylord!" cried Mrs. Murray, as she rushed to greet her. "What in the world —"

She paused on that, recalling suddenly what she had heard at Thompson's of Marion's nursing Haig back to life, and intuitively associating her appearance there with his. Marion saw the thought reflected in the woman's honest face, and knew that after all the happenings of the summer, and the gossip that had followed, her better course was to be frank with Mrs. Murray from the start. Besides she could not wait to ask her questions by any indirection.

"Have you seen him?" she demanded eagerly.

"Yes, he was here — about noontime. The look on his face!"

She threw up her hands in a gesture that indicated the abandonment of all hope for such a man.

"And Sunnysides?"

"Long before him. The critter almost run over my two babies, playin' there before the door. Poor dears, scared almost out o' their skins!"

"What did he say?"

"Nothin'. That is, not much. About the horse first. My man told him it ain't no use tryin' to ketch him, an' it's foolish to try to cross Thunder Mountain. Murray's been here ten years, an' ain't gone much further'n the edge of it. Storms allus drove him back. An' what's the use, when he's got wife an' childer to look after? Of course Haig —"

"What did he say then?"

"He says he c'n cross if Sunnysides can, an' if they can't they'll fight it out up there. My man asks why he didn't go 'round a safe way an' wait for Sunnysides in the San Luis, if he thinks the horse's goin' back home. Haig says he'd made up his mind to cross

Thunder Mountain some time, an' now's as good a time as any. But it's—" She was checked at last by the look of anguish on Marion's face. "But you just come in. It's supper time, almost, an' you must be right hungry. Murray'll be here soon, an' he'll put up your horse."

In the cabin there was to be seen at first just one big room, with two beds at one end, a table surrounded by chairs in the middle, and a stove in the midst of kettles and pans and tubs at the other. But presently Marion noticed a kind of balcony above the beds, and she learned later that this was the "spare bedroom" in which she would be stowed away for the night.

"He was hungry too," Mrs. Murray went on, being careful, however, to confine herself to the material side of the subject. "He ate some dinner, an' then, after we give up tryin' to stop him, Murray said he'd got to take somethin' with him to eat, an' some blankets. He hadn't a thing, mind you, an' didn't want to take nothin', but he did take a good-sized strip o' bacon and some bread — I'd just did the bakin'— an' a fryin'-pan an' matches an' a knife. Murray done 'em up in a pair o' blankets, an' stuck in a leather coat with sheepskin inside, an' hung a hatchet on his saddle. He'll need 'em — if he gits across into the Black Lake country, which's worse some ways than Thunder Mountain — forest't ain't never been touched, an' bad lands, an'—"

Murray's entrance interrupted this speech, which was becoming painful to her guest, in spite of the good woman's resolution to say nothing discouraging. Murray, a bearded, rough fellow in whose face shone good

nature and contentment with the living he made out of his cows and chickens and few head of stock feeding in the mountain meadows, received a whispered hint, and obediently talked of other things than Haig and the runaway. They supped on bacon and eggs, with bread and butter and milk; and an hour afterwards Marion was tucked away in a comfortable bed in that queer "spare bedroom" up against the eaves of the log cabin.

Exhaustion soon brought her sleep. But in the middle of the night she was awakened by a storm that swept high over the ranch house, scarcely touching it in its sheltered hollow, but shrieking and wailing among the rocks and pines. She sat up in her bed to listen! Thunder Mountain! Before her eyes there rose, out of the dark of the cabin, a vision of Philip prone among the rocks of that terrible summit, struck down by the wind, or felled by a thunderbolt, drenched with rain, and perishing of cold. There came, above the howling of the wind, a deafening crash of thunder that rolled away in sullen bellowing. She buried her face among the pillows to shut out the frightful sound; and at length, when the tumult had died away to recur no more, she lay weeping softly until sleep came again to her relief. She did not wake again till morning.

"How much farther up can I go?" asked Marion at breakfast.

"You don't mean —" began Mrs. Murray in alarm.

"No," replied Marion quickly. "I don't mean the top. But can't I ride near enough to see it?"

"You c'n go to timber line safe enough," said Murray.

"Yes, I've been that far, but you mustn't think o' goin further," added the woman, still suspicious. "I'll tell you what! Murray'll go with you."

"By no means!" Marion protested. "It isn't necessary at all. I can follow trails well enough."

"I wish you'd let Murray go with you. He'll be glad to show you —"

"No. Thank you just the same, Mrs. Murray, but —"

"And you'll not try to go past timber line?"

"Don't worry about that, please! I know I could never go where men have failed. I've heard all about Thunder Mountain, and I just want to see it, near. Besides —"

She did not finish, but turned quickly away. This sign of emotion was not hidden from Mrs. Murray, and it heightened her anxiety. Lord only knew what the girl'd try to do once she got out of their sight! But where the intellectual and argumentative Smythe had failed, what could be expected of these simple mountain folk, who for all their sturdy independence were not a little awed by the superior poise and distinction of their visitor? Moreover, Marion was at this moment entirely honest in her assurance that she intended to go no farther than timber line. If the idea that lay deep in the back of her mind had grown since its inception some hours before, it was yet formless and unrecognized; if her purpose now had her firmly gripped, she was as yet unconscious of it, obeying it subconsciously, while she told herself, as she told Mrs. Murray, that she wanted only to satisfy her aching heart by doing merely all that a girl could do. To

make sure that Philip had not already failed — that he had not been thrown back from the very edge of the fatal crest — that he did not now lie somewhere on the last steep slope above timber line, where she might see and save him: this was the utmost of her design in setting out that morning against the protests of her hosts.

Yielding at last, where she could avail no more, the ranchwife fixed up a simple luncheon of bread and butter and jam, which she tied in a little package at Marion's saddlebow. And then, with a final word of warning that she must stop at timber line, an' be back at the house 'fore dark, or she, Mrs. Murray, would be wild, and he, Murray, would have to go searching for her, the good woman let her go, and waved a fat farewell to her until Marion was out of sight among the trees.

Once more the forest enfolded her. Though the wagon road ended at Murray's, the trail was still for some distance plainly marked, and offered few difficulties. Even when it began to be less distinct she was not alarmed. Smythe had told her, and Murray had confirmed his description, that Thunder Mountain was not formidable as far as the foot of the final scarp. Seth had taught her something of the lore of trails, and she was confident that she would be able to find her way even if the underfoot marks should fail. There would be blazes on trees, and broken limbs and twigs, and many subtle signs that she now sought to marshal in her mind against a possible perplexity. With eyes alert, she rode slowly and resolutely on, ever higher and higher, hour after hour, most of the time through

dense woods, but now and then across a rocky slope, or down into a shallow gulch, and out again. By imperceptible degrees the trail grew fainter; and once it failed her utterly, in a small open space in the woods.

For a moment she was on the very point of panic; the forest seemed to be closing in on her with sudden malignity; and the terror of Thunder Mountain held her in its cold grip. But desperation called up her courage. She walked Tuesday in an ever-widening circle around the spot where she had lost the trail, with her heart almost still, and her eyes straining at every tree as it came within her vision. Where? Where? Would there be no more blazes, no more broken limbs, no more prints of hoofs on the mossy earth? Had she left the trail farther back than she had thought? And would she wander over all the vast bosom of the mountain until she fell from the saddle, and knew no more?

It was a real peril, and one that might have had a tragic termination as easily as a happy one,— more easily, indeed, if she had lost her head. But something strong within her kept her senses keen; and suddenly she broke out in a cry of joy and triumph that went echoing down the forest aisles. There, on a patriarchal pine, though almost obliterated by time and weather, was the blaze in the bark that told her the trail ran at the base of that solid trunk. She halted Tuesday there — and faced a new difficulty: in her many circlings she had lost the general direction in which she had been riding. The trail was under her horse's hoofs; but which way should she go? There appeared to be no ascent the one way or the other, and no slope on either side.

She solved the problem by following the trail regardless of direction until she was able to discover in the black mold the fresh print of a horse's hoof — an unshod hoof this was, and the print certainly no older than yesterday. Without serious misgivings now, she rode on, and in a few minutes the trail mounted again with a sharpness sufficient to remove the last of her doubts.

Well, she was a woodsman now, and would fear no more. But she took the precaution to banish all thoughts excepting those necessary to the task in hand. The woods themselves offered countless temptations to distraction. They were alive. Grouse moved among the branches of the trees; small birds of a very silent habit fluttered across the trail; and once a deer slipped away through a dim and leafy avenue. In moist places flowers of tender hues still bloomed as if to shame the autumn browns of the underbrush. And then she emerged from the soft shades of the green woods into one of the most melancholy of mountain places, a great patch of burnt timber. For surely half an hour she rode through a veritable cemetery of pines, among multitudes of tall straight shafts from which the flames had licked the foliage and stripped the limbs, and from which the rains and snows and winds of winter had washed the charred bark until the boles stood white and ghastly, infinitely sad and still. No life was here, no flutter or call or hum of living creatures; and the silence was like a menace. She began to cast apprehensive glances around her, and was glad to the very core of her when the forest gradually greened again, and she was in the cool and friendly shade.

Yet another terrifying experience awaited her,—not terrifying in the sense of any peril to herself so much as in its vivid suggestion of peril to Philip Haig. Without warning there came a prodigious crash of thunder; very near, it seemed. The whole earth rocked and shook, she fancied, under that smashing blow, and thereupon a savage bellowing filled the vault of heaven, and the forest quivered with the reverberations. Hard on the first blow fell another; and then the strokes descended in a swift and terrible succession, until there was one continuous and deafening roar like nothing she had ever heard or imagined. By this she knew that she was now close up under the frowning battlement of Thunder Mountain; and that a storm had burst upon that shelterless and unpitied head, with a malevolent timeliness befitting its ill repute. And somewhere in the midst of that destroying fury was Philip Haig!

The blue tracery of sky was blotted out; the forest became dark as night; the tree tops heaved and thrashed about in the wind that rushed down the mountain side. On the heels of the wind came a drenching rain, and Marion took what refuge was offered close to the trunk of a huge pine, which shook and shivered as if it too had nerves that were unstrung by all this tumult.

It passed, and the sky cleared with what to her seemed extraordinary swiftness. And when she rode out again to pick up the trail, the air was indescribably fresh and exhilarating, and the sun was soon filtering through the foliage upon her pathway.

The trail grew more precipitous, its surroundings more rugged and wild. Rocks took the place of the

soft, mossy soil, and the forest thinned and shrank. Where there had been monarchs in their majesty she rode now among stunted pines and dwarf oaks no higher than her head. And soon she was at timber line, where the beaten and disheartened trees grew downward, or curled along the earth like serpents, or spread out in fantastic, unnatural, and monstrous shapes.

And there at last towered the bald head of Thunder Mountain. She could not see, of course, the flat top itself. Before her rose a precipitous slope, covered with loose stones and débris, and ending in a jagged line of rock against the sky, dull gray against the blue. Thin grass grew yet some distance up the slope; and then it was bare of vegetation, bare of soil, with a wavering faint line marking where life ended and death began.

She halted near the last gnome-tree, and stared at the desolate slope and the forbidding sky line. This was the end of her journey; and she knew no more than she could have known back there in the Park. The mountain was still the sphinx, telling her nothing, though she had come to it at last after months of questioning, with one question on her lips. Where was Philip? Perhaps just yonder, just beyond that sharp-raised barrier. From that crest, no doubt, the whole expanse of the summit would be visible. And how could she go back alone, without being able to assure herself forever that she had done her best?

She studied the slope. From where she stood to the gray sky line the distance was perhaps seven hundred feet. But the trail, which she could discern faintly

marked among the loose and sliding stones, traveled five or six times that distance in its zigzag course. Fascinated, her eyes followed it in and out until its dim line vanished high up in the gray-brown uniformity of the steep ascent. From this she looked up eagerly at the sky. It was a clear steel-blue; the sun shone bright on the expanse of stone; a vigorous but not violent breeze came from around the distant curve of the slope. It seemed incredible, considering all that she had heard, and all that she had imagined. The mountain, she knew, had its brief and infrequent hours of quiet, but she had pictured it as terrifying even in its calm. Now it was formidable and mysterious, and she could not forget its menace; but it was not terrible. On top, perhaps —

She urged Tuesday forward. The trail went far out to the right at an easy gradient, turned sharply, and came back to reach out as far to the left. It was more difficult than Marion had imagined, for the reason that the loose stones afforded an ill footing for the pony, which slipped and slid and stumbled, often going to his knees, and more than once barely avoiding a fall that would have sent horse and rider rolling down to be caught by the network of stunted trees. But Tuesday was sure of foot; and so, with muscles quivering under the strain, and his eyes bulging with anxiety and fear, he climbed up and up without disaster, while Marion leaned far forward in the saddle, her nerves on edge, her eyes alert, and her heart pounding wildly, as much from excitement as from its struggle with that high altitude.

How long that climb endured she never knew; the

actual minutes seemed to her as hours, their total an eternity. But at last, trembling and sweating, Tuesday stood on a narrow shelf of granite, with the long slope behind, and a wall of rock ahead. While the pony rested, Marion looked to left and right for the continuation of the trail. She could not see it, but knew there should be an opening somewhere in the wall that rose sheer some twenty-five or thirty feet above her head. Slowly riding along the platform, searching for a sign, the wall at her left, and the declivity at her right, she came to a place where the barrier curved inward, and was also hollowed out at its base, so that a shallow cave (speaking loosely) was formed, where some sort of shelter might have been found from a storm. This possibility flashed into Marion's mind, for she could not forget the mountain and its ways. She dismounted to look into the cave, and at two steps started forward with a cry.

On the rocky floor was a small heap of ashes and charred ends of sticks. Kneeling quickly, she tore off a glove, and thrust her fingers into the ashes. They were warm! And near the ashes she discovered the rind of a thin slice of bacon, and a few crumbs of bread. Philip had passed Murray's soon after midday; he would have reached the cave, then, before night; and so he had slept there, and risen at dawn, and eaten his meagre breakfast, and ridden on.

She leaped to her feet, ran out and mounted her pony, and rode forward along the platform, searching for the trail.

CHAPTER XXI

IN THE HOLLOW OF THE STORM

HAIG arrived at timber line about an hour before nightfall. On the long trail he had considered thoroughly all the chances of his case, and was prepared to undergo delays and disappointments. He knew Thunder Mountain. Even without reckoning on storms (and the vapors were at that moment settling down on the frowning battlement), it were foolhardiness, or worse, to attempt the passage of the mountain in the night. Then he remembered the shallow cave that he had noticed on his previous visit to the summit; and his plans were made.

He gathered an armful of dry sticks and shreds of bark, climbed the treacherous slope as Marion did some hours later, and settled himself in the half-shelter of the cave to await the morning. A rasher of bacon, a slice of bread, and a pipe of tobacco refreshed him; and he rolled himself in his blankets, and went to sleep. Like Marion in the "spare bedroom" far below, he was awakened in the night by the savage hammerings of the storm. The very rocks beneath him seemed to be jarred by that cannonade; the wind, howling around the cliff, threatened to drag him out of his cave; and the rain fell in torrents on the platform, almost flooding his stone bed. But he turned over in his blankets,

and hoped the mountain would "keep it up" all night. Even Sunnysides would be halted by a storm like that.

He arose at the first sign of dawn, hurried through his scant and salty breakfast, quenched his thirst with rain water scooped out of depressions in the rock, and started on. Knowing the trail at this point, he rode straight out along the platform, and came in half a minute to the spot where the wall of rock was broken down into a clutter of débris, in width some forty feet. Up through this litter of disintegrated granite the trail lurched with many twists and turns, and emerged at last upon one of the lower levels of the summit.

Trixy was winded, and for a moment Haig rested her, while he surveyed the scene. And in the thrill of that moment, facing the undertaking in which he had once failed, he all but forgot Sunnysides. The wind was low, and scarcely more difficult to meet than a stiff blow in the Park; but aside from that he saw little encouraging in the prospect. Behind him, it was true, the forests and all the hills and valleys lay clear in the morning light, with just a thin mist clinging in the gulches; and around him on all sides but one the sharp peaks stood up shining white in the first rays of the sun. But in front of him gray vapors, not yet dense enough to be described as clouds, came swirling and tumbling toward him across the stone-littered surface of the flat. Unless the sun should dissipate those vapors — He shrugged his shoulders, and rode on.

Almost fourteen thousand feet above the level of the sea, the bald head of Thunder Mountain, stripped as it has been of its ennobling peak, needs only three or four hundred feet to be as high as the snow-clad summits on

each side. Seen from afar, that bare head appears to be as flat and smooth as a table, but in reality its entire area, roughly circular in outline, and something more than three miles in its largest diameter, is broken up into terraces, into slopes and hillocks, into hollows and mounds, all strewn with bowlders and loose stones, with here and there uprearing rocks of fantastic and suggestive shapes. There is no life there,— no birds, no conies or chipmunks that inhabit most high places of these mountains; no flowers, no grass, no sign of vegetation; nothing but granite. The trail runs sometimes plainly across level reaches of loose stones, sometimes over long smooth surfaces of rock, sometimes in and out among wildernesses of shattered and tumbled fragments of the mountain's blasted head. At varying intervals, particularly in its more difficult stages, it is marked by small pyramids of stones, and by crosses cut crudely in the rock. Care must be taken not to miss one of these marks; for the trail, in avoiding inaccessible heaps of granite, goes in places perilously near the edge of the summit, which falls away in more than one known precipice a thousand feet to the unknown gulch below.

The wind was cold, and Haig felt that its strength was steadily increasing, though it yet blew fitfully. He made the second level without mishap, but was brought to a momentary standstill there by the fiercer rush of wind on the higher terrace. It seemed strange, at first thought, that the wind had not blown away the vapors that now enveloped him; but he saw presently that it was not blowing across the mountain, but rather in a circular, whirlwind motion that gradually became more violent. The terrace he now crossed was as

smooth as a floor, and he found his way only by means of the crosses carved in the rocks beneath his feet. Then the trail dropped suddenly into a shallow trough; mounted to another field of crumbled stones; and rose unevenly to a barrier that he remembered with a pang of chagrin. This was what at the first glance would have appeared to be a solid and insurmountable wall of rock, perhaps fifteen feet in height, and stretching away to the very edge of the plateau at his right, and to a wilderness of granite on the left. But directly ahead of him the wall was cleft, and there was a narrow pathway climbing up between two huge rocks that had been carved by the elements into shapes bearing a fanciful resemblance to human figures. These were the Twin Sisters.

Here Haig had been caught by a storm that hurled him back defeated; and he had, moreover, narrowly escaped a worse thing than mere defeat; for the wind had carried him off the trail, and almost to the brink of the chasm that yawned some hundred yards away. Now, remembering that experience, he spurred Trixy forward to take the aperture in the wall before the wind should suddenly become insupportable; and this time he was more fortunate. The pony leaped and clambered up the slippery path, and at the exit was caught by a blast that hurled and pinned her, as if she had been no heavier than a butterfly, against the base of the righthand towering figure. For some seconds neither horse nor man was able to move from that fixed position, where the wind flattened them against the rock. Then it swerved sharply, flung them against the other Sister with such force that Haig's leg was

stunned and bruised, and finally released them with a shriek that sounded like a cry of disappointed rage. Trixy plunged forward with a snort, and Haig saw that the trail was again plain across another field of scattered stones.

Now, thrilled by this victory, he urged the pony onward at all possible speed toward the worst of all the perils of the mountain. The stone field was succeeded by a series of mounds and hollows, and this by a second slippery floor; and then he mounted the ridge that terminated in the Devil's Chair. Here was the highest point attained by the trail: a flat rock measuring perhaps twenty yards one way, and a little less the other, lifted high above the surrounding slopes, and having (hence its name) a huge back formed by the abrupt termination of the ridge. From the chair the rock dipped in a kind of hollow like a chute, worn smooth by the winds and rains; and everything that ever fell into that chute was swallowed by the chasm of unplumbed and unestimated depth. Sometimes the wind blew up through the chute across the Devil's Chair; sometimes it blew down through it into the chasm. It was blowing out when Parker reached the chair, and he was hurled back down the slope three times before he acknowledged his defeat; it was blowing in when the three members of the English party were sucked down into the chasm.

Haig could have cried aloud the joy that ran through him, when, having spurred Trixy up the steep ascent to a footing on the Devil's Chair, he found that almost a perfect calm reigned there, due to some sudden shift in the currents of the air.

"Quick, Trixy! On!" he cried.

The horse bounded across the platform, slid and stumbled down the other side, and was up again, leaping forward, and a little to the left, where there was firmer going over another field of stones. And now at length, to Haig's relief, the trail bent sharply in toward the middle of the plateau, and thus away from the peril of the chasms.

But his elation was short-lived. If Thunder Mountain had admitted him between the Twin Sisters, and spared him at the Devil's Chair, it was only to hurl upon him its accumulated fury farther on. Engrossed in the endless difficulties of the trail, he had not observed the stealthy and insidious change that was taking place in the atmosphere until it had advanced far toward its climax. The un-looked for calm, so opportune, was but a pause before an outburst of elemental rage. The vapors lifted, and hung in still masses a few feet above the earth. Haig picked his way along in a strange, weird, yellowish light, in a stillness that was all the more impressive by contrast with the recent howling and hammering of the wind. There was not a faintest puff of air on his cheek, and not a sound except the click of Trixy's feet among the stones, and his own hurried breathing. All else seemed to have paused, expectant, waiting.

It did not come as storms come in the valley, or on the plain, or among the hills; not even as they come in the mountains. It did not come from north, or east, or west, or south, or from any known horizon; it had no sensible direction; it was there. Out of the portentous hush (not into it) there came first a whisper,

something low and malevolent; then a singular moaning sound, incomparably dismal and hollow and pervasive. Haig moved his head from side to side, endeavoring to trace it — before, behind, above — he knew not where. The moaning murmur grew, and still there was no perceptible movement in the air; it rose whining up, up, up the scale until at last it was a shrill, demoniacal shriek. And then, out of the darkening mists, it leaped upon him.

In this whirling, wicked, wondrous thing there was no orderly and recognizable succession of phenomena, such as wind and lightning and rain. These came all in one swoop, all in one frightful blend. It was black, and it was bright. The lightning came not from the sky, discharging its bolts to earth; it was on the very surface of the plateau. It flamed and crackled on uplifted rocks; it ran hissing like fiery serpents among the scattered stones; it buzzed and exploded in the very face of Haig, and under the pony's belly. If he had been caught in a burning storehouse of fireworks — rockets, Roman candles, pinwheels, and all the ingenious products of the pyrotechnician — the experience might have been like this, only a thousand times less terrifying. He dodged and ducked, and threw up his hands to shield his face, expecting instantly that one of those exploding things would make an end of him.

Then there were other horrors to be endured. The din became incessant. Simultaneous with the hiss and crackle and crack of the lightning there was a continuous deafening detonation in the air above him, crash on crash and roar on roar. The terrors of the first few seconds had been chiefly those felt and heard. But

the wind had steadily increased in violence. It did not blow against him, bowling him over, but whirled around him with a speed that was every instant accelerated. He felt that he had no weight. He seemed about to be lifted into the vortex of the storm, to be flung far out into space.

"Down, girl! Down!" he tried to shout.

But there was no sound from his lips. He felt the pony stiffening under him, bracing herself stiff-legged on the stones; and he knew that she shared his fear. And all this time the rain beat down upon him, in lead-like sheets, with intermittent bombardments of hailstones. It occurred to him to wonder dully which would win — the wind that sought to whirl him up into the sky, or the rain that was for beating him to earth, or the lightning that would burn him to cinders. Then thought left him, and his last impression was of being torn limb from limb, and atom from atom, in excruciating pain.

He was roused at length to the consciousness of having been lifted and hurled; and found himself prostrate on the ground, face downward, with the rain flooding him. Trixy lay at his side, flat like himself, her head stretched out among the stones. They seemed to lie in a vacuum, in the very hollow of the storm. Around them the clatter, the clang and the uproar were even more terrifying than before because they were now separated from these noises, no longer a part of them. All was blackness, shot through with fire. Haig was no more tortured in his body, except for the sense of being suffocated. He seemed to inhale raw ozone; the air fairly stank with the odors of decom-

position; the saliva in his mouth had a peculiar pungent and disagreeable taste. He gasped and fought for breath.

Such reason as was left to him told him that this was the end of all. At any instant something would flash out of that wall of blackness, and destroy him with a blow. His spirit rose exultantly to meet and welcome it; he rejoiced in such a death, slain by the elements, on the roof of the world, alone, unseen; it was a glorious exit, the finish he had sought for years on years, his heart's desire. Triumphant and defiant, he tried to roar back at the thunder, to outscream the wind, to face the lightning with undimmed eyes.

There came a blinding flash, exceeding in brightness anything he had yet experienced. But with it, to his amazement, there emerged from the blackness a vision that brought life back to him with a shocking thrill. For there, not ten paces distant, was Sunnysides. Only for an instant; and then all was again obscure. He must have been mistaken. It was only a figment of fancy, a creation of his tortured brain, a phenomenon associated with his passing from life to death. And yet he waited, staring into the smothering void.

Another flash of fire across the black — and Sunnysides! But now the lightning, as if directed by some intelligence, became again continuous, its flashes joined in one spouting flame. And in the very midst of it stood the outlaw in his familiar attitude, with one forefoot slightly raised, his head high, his nostrils distended, his dark eyes filled with fire. There had never been anything so bright and beautiful. His golden hide gleamed with planetary splendor, like the mythi-

cal horses of the sun. This was The Horse, the golden epiphany of the brute, the answer to all of Haig's fears and resolutions. And in the very hour of his exit —

Rage rose again within him. Instinctively, for he was scarce capable of thought, he tried to reach his revolver. But his arms were leaden. His fingers touched the butt of the weapon, and stopped as if paralyzed. The horse wavered and danced before his eyes; there was a culminating detonation; he felt a terrific blow on his head. And he knew no more.

CHAPTER XXII

THE NARROW PASSAGE

LIGHT came with unutterable mystery. Yet Haig lay for a moment waiting, mistrustful of the peace that encompassed him. Then he cautiously raised his head, and looked. Trixy stood near him, panting and wild-eyed. The whole surface of the plateau was glistening wet; a cold breeze poured over him, without violence; and the sky above him was as innocent and bright as a baby's smile.

Where, then, was the storm? He moved his head painfully, and searched the horizon; and yonder, around the icy parapets of Silver Tip, with roll on roll of reverberations in its wake, the black storm was in full flight. His eyes followed it with a curious and exaggerated interest; for he had seen its birth, and tested its power, and it had given him a new experience.

Presently he tried to rise, and found that his limbs were numb. His right arm ached to the tips of his fingers. His head swam, and he had difficulty in arranging his impressions in any sort of orderly succession, especially those in which Sunnysides participated.

"I wonder how much of it really happened!" he mused.

Unexpectedly his eyes lighted on his revolver, where it lay among the stones at his side. Ah! It had burned his fingers. He picked it up, and examined i

curiously. But none of the cartridges had been exploded. The gun, then, had been knocked out of his hand before he could lift and aim it; and the storm had taunted him with Sunnysides, and cheated him. No matter! The game was not yet up.

He struggled to his feet, and stretched himself, and pounded his chest, which ached from his heavy breathing. Then his eyes sought the trail ahead, scanning the level spaces and the heaped-up masses of granite; and an instant later a cry escaped his lips. For there, perhaps half a mile away, and mounting rapidly a gray ridge of rock, his body outlined against the blue sky, was Sunnysides. It had been no vision, then, no figment of his tortured brain. But where had the horse been all this time, to have been caught in the same storm with his pursuer, despite his half-hour start, his greater speed, and the night that came between them? True, there had been a storm in the night; that might have delayed, but it should not have kept him. True, too, he might have lost the trail, and wandered over the plateau; but Haig could not have missed him, if he had been anywhere in sight before the storm revealed him. No, nothing could explain it; and there remained only one hypothesis, which was untenable, preposterous and mad. And yet it fascinated and held him. He had once said jocularly that Sunnysides was not a real horse at all; that he was a demon — a spirit. Well, it was a real horse, right enough, that had crushed him, and thrown him again, and broken Bill Craven's leg, and fled; and that was a real horse yonder, outlined against the sky. If some devilish instinct in the brute, or some agent of Destiny, or mere fling of chance had

held him on the plateau to tantalize and lead on his pursuer —

"Dreaming again!" Haig muttered, with a wry smile, and yet with a vague uneasiness that he could not put down.

But in another instant he had leaped to his horse, tested the cinches with trembling fingers, climbed stiffly into the saddle, and dug the spurs into Trixy's flanks. When he looked again toward the ridge, the outlaw had disappeared; but there was no ignis-fatuus trick in that; and the horse would be seen again when Haig too had topped the rise. For the trail was now leading him in a relatively straight line toward the exact spot where Sunnysides had vanished; and more assuring than all else, a very material and comforting proof that this was a real horse he followed, was the discover, he made halfway up the slope. There, among the stones, lay the outlaw's saddle. Clearly the runaway had only just now been able to shake it off, and its condition, bruised and cut and dirty, showed that Sunnysides had been put to some trouble to be rid of it, having doubtless rolled over and over on it in his efforts to be free. And there, too, was a plausible explanation of the fact that Sunnysides was not now far on the trail.

From the top of the ridge, Haig saw the outlaw picking his way through a wilderness of rocks that had the grewsome aspect of a cemetery — the graveyard of the gods. Following through this depressing scene, he lost sight of Sunnysides, and on emerging upon another floor-like expanse of solid stone he received a surprise that caused him to rein up Trixy with a jerk. The quarry was nowhere in sight, though Haig's position

gave him a sweeping view of the flat ahead of him, even to the edge of the summit, now scarcely three quarters of a mile away. There was no possibility that the horse could have traversed that distance in the time Haig was passing through the "cemetery;" neither was there any place on that part of the plateau where it could be concealed.

The trail itself solved the mystery. It did not lead straight on, as Haig had imagined; and he experienced some difficulty in finding it on the smooth floor, from which the elements had all but obliterated the crosses made by the pioneers. Then his astonishment was great to find that it turned at a sharp angle to the left, dropped sheer over the edge of the flat rock, coiled down a slope littered with débris to another field of loose stones, and in a quarter of a mile brought up at the brink of a cliff. Sunnysides, then, had crossed the summit, and was descending to whatever lay below.

In ten minutes Haig himself was at the margin of the chasm; for little wider than a chasm was that deep and narrow gulch, far up the side of Thunder Mountain, into which he now looked in wonderment and perplexity. A thousand feet or more below him lay a tiny patch of meadow of a brilliant green, with a thread of water sparkling through it, and on all sides, excepting that nearest him, black forests encompassed it, and mounted dense to the timber line save where, at his right, the stream ran down through its gorge. There, evidently, would go the trail also, dropping into the Black Lake country, of evil reputation.

But where now was the trail? He dismounted, and leaned over the edge of the precipice; and there he dis-

covered that he had missed the exact point of departure by some fifteen yards, and that at this distance to his left there was a break in the sharp brink, where the trail fell off precipitately to a heap of broken stone and sand. The cliff had been shattered in some convulsion of nature, or loosened and disintegrated by the elements, and enormous masses of it had fallen into the gulch. These masses appeared to be in a state of instability, and it was not clear to Haig, from where he lay, how a trail could ever have been picked out among those jutting rocks and slides of débris, or how, once found, it could have remained intact on that shifting foundation. Was it possible that any living thing had ever made its way down (much less *up*) that steep and treacherous rubble heap?

He was studying it incredulously, when Sunnysides suddenly resolved all doubts. From behind a projecting rock the horse came out on one of the many rough ledges that had been formed by lateral cleavage of the cliff in its fall. Hesitating a moment there, he plunged down a short declivity, and landed sprawling on another shelf perhaps twenty feet lower down, and somewhat to the right of the first, where he once more vanished from Haig's sight.

"All right!" cried Haig. "If you can do that we can. Eh, Trixy?"

He mounted quickly, urged the reluctant mare to the break in the edge of the cliff, and forced her over. For some thirty feet the trail went down the face of the precipice, much like a fire escape on the wall of a tenement house, barely wide enough to accommodate horse and rider,— so narrow, indeed, that Haig's left leg

was scraped and bruised by hard contact with the stone. At the bottom of this incline, his amazement was great at finding a solid platform of rock, on which he was able easily to turn and go down another incline underneath the first. Plainly all this was not the result of accident; the hands of men had been busy here; and picks and shovels had supplemented the work of nature. But below the next platform there certainly had been a secondary slide of rock, for the trail was nowhere discernible, though it should evidently have slipped down, at a greater angle from the cliff than before, to a third turning point on a shelf some forty feet away to the left. Here the débris was loose and fine, and with a little urging Trixy was induced to take the descent, carrying quantities of sand and stones with her as she slid and sprawled safely to the next goal.

Thus they went, sometimes finding the trail plain over solid rock and hard-packed débris, sometimes slipping and scrambling among stones and sand, but always drawing nearer and nearer in a zigzag course, now easy and then difficult, to the green vale below. There were moments when Trixy was on her knees, moments when she was on her haunches, moments when she stood swaying above the pit, and moments when all traces of the trail had vanished. But somewhere below was Sunnysides.

Far down the declivity, so near the valley that Haig was able to look across into the tops of the tallest pines, they came to what appeared to be the last of the rocky ledges. Having for some minutes seen nothing of the outlaw, Haig supposed that the runaway had already reached the meadow, and was by now on the trail

through the forest. But just as Trixy's shod hoofs struck the platform with a clatter, Haig caught sight of Sunnysides far out on the narrow shelf. He was trotting briskly along, for the shelf was smooth and level. But, on a sudden he stopped, stood a moment with his head thrust forward and down, and then turned cautiously around, his four feet bunched together on the narrow footing.

"What's up now?" ejaculated Haig.

And then he saw it. Twice before he had noted where a similar error might have been made, on other ledges farther up; and he himself had avoided them only by carefully studying the aspect of the declivity below him. Sunnysides had undoubtedly lost time through such mistakes; and now he was trapped. At the point where he stood, the shelf ended abruptly "in the air"; and between him and the exit at the other end of the platform was Haig. The trail had come down to about the middle of this platform, which was like an unrailed balcony, scarce three feet in width, with a high wall of rock on one side, and on the other a straight drop of twenty feet to a veritable chute of stones that terminated in a widespread litter of débris on the meadow.

"Caught like a rat!" cried Haig. "I've got you now!"

But what could he do with him? His rope was useless on that meager footing, where there was barely room for his horse to stand, much less for Haig to swing a noose. And worse: if Sunnysides was trapped, so was his enemy; for the horse was already, through fright or belligerency, moving slowly toward Haig. In

a flash it was clear to Haig that the outlaw meant to have it out with him then and there; and that there would be no time to turn Trixy, and find the outlet into the valley.

"It's too bad, but —"

He drew his revolver, and waited. There was yet a chance, he thought, or hoped, that the horse would halt, and postpone the issue. He did not want to kill him; he had not come across Thunder Mountain to kill him; he had come to take him back to Paradise Park. And so he waited — fatally. The outlaw came slowly until half the space between him and Haig had been covered. Then, at a distance of perhaps a hundred feet, when no choice was left to him, Haig swung up his gun, and fired. At that very instant, Sunnysides uttered a savage cry, a shrill neigh ending in a scream; and charged at the horse and rider in his path.

Haig fired again, and missed; threw himself forward on Trixy's neck, jerked the pony's head in toward the wall, and fired again; and missed. He tried to shoot once more, into the very face of the oncoming brute, but too late. There was a vision of flaming black eyes and white teeth, in a yellow blur; and then a tremendous impact, a crash. Trixy was flung back on her haunches, with one hind leg over the edge of the shelf, Haig barely hanging in the saddle. The outlaw leaped back, and lunged again; thrust himself between Trixy and the wall; toppled pony and rider off into the void; and passed on, with a shriek of triumphant rage.

Haig and Trixy turned in the air, struck the chute of stones and sand, and rolled over and over as they

went down in a flying slide of débris. But Haig did not know that, for his head struck a stone at the first contact with the chute.

Sentience returned to him through mists of pain. He lay in a twisted heap on a patch of grass, surrounded by the scattered detritus of the cliff. At first he could not remember, and could not see. His head rang with pain, and his eyes were filled with dust, and with something wet. He managed presently to lift an arm and wipe his eyes with his hand; and saw dimly that the hand was covered with blood. His eyes then filled again; and he swept his sleeves across them and his forehead. That was better. Blinking, and wiping his face again and again, he looked dully around him until memory came back, and brought recognition of his plight.

He tried to sit up, but sank down quickly with a groan. One leg was bent almost double under the other, and would not move. This fact struck him at first as very queer — an inexplicable phenomenon. Then he tried it again. His left leg moved at his will, and that encouraged him. His right hip and part of the thigh too moved, but the leg below lay loose and dead.

The blood was in his eyes again. It exasperated him; he could do nothing unless he were able to see. He wiped his face again with his sleeve, then put his hand to his head, and winced a little as the fingers touched a gash just above the left temple, from which the blood still flowed. By turning his head he found that the blood ran down away from his eyes instead of

into them. The new position also gave him a view of several things that held his attention.

First there was the clutter of stones around him. Then his eyes swept upward to the ledge whence he had come rolling down — how far? He calculated the distance curiously. Eighty feet — a hundred, surely. How did he come to be still alive? he wondered. And Trixy! Where was she.

Once more he tackled the problem of sitting up, and it became easier now in his full understanding of his condition. By ignoring the dead leg entirely, since it was of no further use to him, he contrived to raise himself with his hands on the ground behind him for support. Then with a jerk that brought a cry of pain, he sat erect, swaying but resolute. At this instant he heard a soft whinny behind him. Twisting himself around, he saw Trixy lying some twenty feet away, with her forelegs doubled up beneath her, and her head lifted and pointed toward him. He studied the little mare a moment.

"Trixy! Get up!" he commanded suspiciously.

She lifted her head higher, made a desperate effort to rise, sank back, and whinnied piteously.

"So! Yours too, eh! Nice fix, Trixy!"

He surveyed the scene. They were in a bright green meadow about two hundred yards in width and perhaps half a mile in length. Across the meadow from where he lay the black forest mounted toward the sky. At one end the vale narrowed into a mere ravine, which vanished upward in deep woods; at the other it widened to the forest, and by the way the pine-masses came down to this spot from both sides he knew that there

the trail ran down the mountain toward the Black Lake country. The vale was very still under the bright blue sky; there was just a murmur in the forest; and no sound of birds came to his ears.

"A beautiful site — for a graveyard!" he said aloud, and smiled

The blood stil trickled into his eyes, and annoyed him greatly. It must be stopped, or he could do nothing that needed to be done. In an inside pocket of his coat he found a handkerchief, which he bound around his head, after he had wiped his face once more. The pain in his head had subsided to a dull throbbing, which did not matter. But —"

"God! I'm thirsty!" he muttered.

He looked again across the meadow. The thread of water that he had seen from the top of the cliff was a considerable brook that ran silently through about the middle of the green. He measured the distance,— fifty or sixty yards, maybe seventy, or more. He could do it, by dragging himself along the ground, he thought. But was it worth the effort, and the pain? It would hurt him like the devil — that broken leg. Never did like pain; would probably howl; and that would not be nice, even with no creature but Trixy to hear him. No; he would stay where he was. Then suddenly he thought of Pete's whisky, and thrust his hand into his pocket, only to encounter fragments of glass.

"That's a lesson," he thought grimly. "Never carry whisky in glass bottles."

And now his roving eyes lighted once more on Trixy. No good letting her suffer. He would send her away first. On the thought, his hand went back to the

holster at his hip; and stayed there, while his heart stood still, and a chill went over him, and thought ceased. The holster was empty.

After a while he was able to think about it. One of two things would happen to him. There were, very probably, mountain lions in those forests. But they were not the worst thing he faced. To be eaten were perhaps preferable to dying little by little, of hunger and thirst. He had been near starvation twice in his life; and once he had been thirsty,— that is to say, *thirsty*,— and God save him from dying of thirst! But wait! He hesitated; then held his breath; and in a total suspension of thought slowly reached his hand down into a side pocket of his trousers. And then he almost yelled aloud for joy. His pocket-knife was there!

Meanwhile — Trixy. It was cruel not to be able to end her suffering. What had become of the gun? It was in his hand when he toppled over the edge of the platform, and must have fallen with him. So it could not be far away, though perhaps buried out of sight. He began patiently to inspect every square foot of the ground around him, as far as he could trust his eyes to see clearly, separating the space into imaginary segments of a circle, and scrutinizing each of them until he had set apart every tuft of grass from every other tuft, and every stone from its neighbors. Minute after minute, with dogged perseverance, he kept himself at this exhausting task until the sweat was rolling down his face, and his eyes burned deep in his head. Then suddenly something leaped inside of him,— some nerve that was quicker than thought in its response to vision.

"Ah!"

The gun lay against a stone, its muzzle upward, at a distance of about forty feet, beyond and somewhat to the left of Trixy. It would take some crawling; and that would hurt. But when he had fixed the gun's position in his mind, so that he might not miss it, he set his teeth together, and started.

No great distance, after all, is forty feet. That is to say, no great distance after you've covered it. And the pain did not matter now. He lay on the ground again, flattened out, panting and gazing up at the blue sky. The sweat stood in big cold drops on his face; and he trembled as if stricken with ague. He could not shoot in that condition; he must rest, and wait. But the thirst was torture now.

After a time, he turned himself half around in order to face Trixy, and rested his right elbow on the ground with the gun up in the air.

"Good-by, Trixy!" he said softly.

But wait! How many shots left? He examined the revolver. Two! For an instant he was stricken again with dread. Then his left hand felt for the belt at his waist; and he laughed nervously. What a state he was in! There were cartridges to burn!

The gun came slowly down to an aim, then waved in his hand as he pulled the trigger.

"Hell!" he muttered.

He tried again, pulling himself together, and gritting his teeth. The second report rang out, and echoed high among the rocks. The mare's head fell, her body quivered, one hind foot kicked out; and she was gone.

Oh, yes! He could hit good horses! But not Sunnysides.

He ejected the exploded cartridges, and filled the chambers with fresh ones; then lay back and rested again, the gun still clutched in his hand. And why did he wait? To get strength, for one thing. He wanted to sit up to do it, since he could not stand. And then — there was another trouble. Four times before he had tried to do it, and something had happened,— something different and utterly unexpected each time had checked him. It had not so much mattered then, because he could afford to wait. But now —

He drew upon the last of his reserves of strength, and sat up — too suddenly. An excruciating pain shot through his injured leg, and radiated like flame through every nerve and tissue of his body. The revolver, half lifted, fell from his fingers. Swaying, he groped for it, clutched it again, and frantically raised it to his head. And when he felt the hard muzzle just above his ear, he pulled the trigger. And so the third report went ringing through the quiet valley, and Philip Haig sank backward on the greensward, and lay still.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MIRACLE

BETWEEN two storms, the peace that lay upon the seared and battered head of Thunder Mountain, like the peace that comes to a sufferer between paroxysms of pain, was of a kind unknown to lower levels. In all the range of natural phenomena, in all the gamut of sensation, there is nothing else at once so beautiful, inspiring, and appalling as utter silence; and nothing else so rare. To the sea, the desert, and the peak it is given in few and perfect hours; but neither to the desert nor to the sea is it given in such transcendency as to the peak. And on no peak could silence ever have seemed so like a miracle as on the flat top of Thunder Mountain between two storms.

It were hazardous to say how far Marion was conscious of the beautiful, inspiring, and appalling nature of that silence. She was too deeply intent upon her purpose to be conscious of much besides the material difficulties in her path. She knew that on the gray black surface of the mountain nothing stirred; that the winds were still; that no murmur of forest or ripple of water or soft pulsation of a living world was there. It was a dead place, dead these many ages; and all its associations in her mind were those of death and the living terror of death. But she was not afraid. True she was beset by fears, but they only hovered over her

brushing her face with their black wings. True also, her eyes roved wide, as if at any instant something unknown and dreadful would come upon her out of that blue sky, from behind the next rock barrier, or up from the mountain's ugly heart itself. But these were superficial fears, and in her heart she was not afraid.

From the moment that she emerged upon the first terrace, where Haig had stood some hours before, she knew that she would not go back until (and unless) she found him. That had been her purpose from the beginning, from the time she ran down the hill above Huntington's, with Smythe following in alarm; but it had been hidden from her until, in the exaltation that ensued upon the finding of the ashes of Haig's fire, she drove her pony up the last ascent, and knew that if the mountain had claimed Philip it must claim her too.

But this thought was, in a sense, as superficial as her fears; for in her soul there lived a perfect faith. Through all her grief and jealousy and anger and despair she had never entirely lost the pure light of her star. She never doubted deeply that her love would triumph, even when reason told her that it had already failed; and the very words with which she had consented to leave the Park by the last stage were hollow, though they contained a prayer. She had prayed for a miracle; and the miracle had happened. Why should she be afraid?

So she was not surprised when the Twin Sisters welcomed her without so much as a gentle puff of wind upon her cheek; when the Devil's Chair, though she held her breath at sight of what lay below, was scarce more difficult than the ridge in Paradise Park; and

when the central waste, where the storm had leaped on Haig, held no evil in store for her. The only obstacles encountered were those presented by the trail itself; and these, as Smythe had told her, though by no means trivial, were not insurmountable to one with a clear eye and steady nerves. It was never the trail itself that was deadly; it was the wind that would blow her into a chasm, the mist that would decoy her from the path, and the storm that would beat her down among the stones. But there was no wind, no mist, no storm; and if that was not a miracle —

Several times, to be sure, she missed the trail: once in the second field of loose stones, before she had become accustomed to the signs; once on a wide floor of solid rock, where Tuesday slipped and fell, and she rose a little stunned, and in a brief confusion; and once, the most alarming of all, when she was for half an hour lost in that granite wilderness that to Haig had suggested a cemetery of the gods. But faith sustained her, and her purpose stood in the stead of courage that might have faltered and even failed. The one moment when something like despair struck at her heart was that when she found the bruised and dirty saddle cast aside by the runaway, and thought at first that it was Philip's; and the one moment of real terror was that in which, on the summit of the last ridge, she looked back and saw that dark gray vapors were surging up out of the chasm below the Devil's Chair.

It chanced that in following the trail from the sharp turn on the last rock floor to the brink of the cliff (the last pyramid stands some fifty yards back from it), Marion arrived at about the same distance to the left

of the drop-off as Haig had brought up at the right of it. From this point even less of the meadow was visible than Haig had seen at the first view, and the mass of fallen and tumbled granite appeared even more formidable. Her immediate sensation was of tragic despair, as the evidence of her eyes for one instant overwhelmed her faith. But where was Philip? And Sunnysides?

Then a suspicion flashed into her mind. Perhaps she had missed the trail,— the real trail. She could not have been mistaken in the signs; there was the last pyramid in plain view still from where she stood. But it was not unlikely that there was another trail from the sharp turn where she had been confused for a moment, another exit made necessary by the disruption of the cliff. She paused uncertainly, looking now at the great heap of stone below her,— a thousand feet of jagged rock and sliding sand,— and now back at the toilsome way she had come. And then her eyes were caught by something that held her spellbound with horror. Up to the rocky skyline from beyond the barrier she had lately crossed there swept a tumbling mist, as gray-black as the rock itself; and an instant after she felt a stinging blow of wind on her cheek, and heard a low whisper in the air around her.

She was roused by a sound that brought her up rigid and alert in the saddle. What was that? A faint report, as of a gun — from somewhere. She listened, turning her head slowly and cautiously, and holding her breath. A long time, it seemed to her, she listened; and heard only that warning whisper of the wind across the flat. But there! Another! It came up faintly

from below, expiring at the very edge of the precipice. She peered guardedly down into the chasm, and saw nothing but the vast pile of débris, and a bit of green meadow over against the edge of the black forest. But it was a gun! She began now to examine the edge of the cliff. To her left it fell sheer away hundreds of feet to the lower masses of fallen stone; and there was no trail on that side. Dismounting, she led her horse slowly along the brink at her right; and so came at length to the spot where the trail dropped to the first incline. It seemed incredible; but then, even as the word framed itself in her mind, her heart bounded up into her throat. There — there — under her eyes were hoofprints, the print of steel shoes in the sand; and they went down, down, down. And, as if to remove the last of doubt and hesitancy, there came wavering up from below a third thin report, a little more distinct than the others, and undeniable.

She lifted her face toward the sky, and pressed her hands upon her breast.

"God help us! God help us — both!" she murmured.

Then she remounted Tuesday, and forced him over the edge of the cliff.

Haig lay on his back, his head against the stone by which he had recovered the coveted revolver. A handkerchief dyed red and blackened with powder stains lay against one cheek. His right hand still clutched the revolver.

He did not move, and she thought him dead. Then, through the blackness that enveloped her, she dully

and slowly comprehended that his eyes were closed, not staring up at her. She knelt swiftly, and pressed her head to his breast; and then leaped to her feet with a wild outcry.

Tuesday stood a few yards away, with tail outstretched and nostrils distended, gazing affrightedly at the body of Trixy lying in her wretched heap. Marion ran to the saddle, and tore at the thongs that held her bundle; jerked it loose, and bore it quickly to Haig's side; and in a few seconds had placed the mouth of her whisky flask between Haig's lips, and let a little of the liquid trickle down his throat. But there was no response, and she stood up again, looking for water. The brook that had seemed so far away from Haig was at no distance for her flying feet; and she was back on the run with her sombrero filled. Dashing the water into Philip's face, she was off again for more. With this she bathed his face and neck and wrists; and then set herself to slapping the palms of his hands with her own.

Still there was no response. But when she pressed her head to his breast once more she was assured that she had not been mistaken; his heart was beating feebly — but beating. A second time she put the whisky flask to his lips; and returned to the limp hands, rubbing them, slapping them until her own burned and ached.

Hours it seemed, and ages flowing away into eternity. The sky was darkening, and from the top of Thunder Mountain came a muffled roar that was echoed back and forth across the valley. She looked up at the towering cliff, and trembled. And then, with the last

fading reverberation, there came another sound that brought her leaning down close to Philip's face. Was it a sigh, or only —

"Philip! Philip! Philip!" she called, softly at first, then in a cry that rang across the meadow.

At last a quiver went through the limp figure; the eyes were opened, only to be quickly closed again, as if the light had hurt them. She called to him again, in pleading accents. The eyelids fluttered, and he looked up into the face of the girl bending over him. It was a puzzled, uncomprehending look. And thereupon his lips moved.

"Yes, Philip! What is it?"

"I don't understand," he whispered.

"It's Marion!" she cried. "Don't you know me?"

"But — where?"

"I don't know. Thunder Mountain."

"Yes, I know that!" he said, with a note of impatience. "Sunnysides and — all that. But — you?"

"I followed, and found you."

A weak smile flickered on his lips. She saw that he did not believe her.

"Look! Look!" she cried. "It's Marion. And yonder —is Tuesday."

He moved his head a little, and stared at the pony still standing fascinated and terrified by the stillness of poor Trixy.

"It's — impossible!" he muttered. "You couldn't —"

He made an effort to look up at the cliff down which he had come.

"But it's quite true, Philip. I'm here."

But she saw that he was still groping in the dark. He lifted his right hand, and touched his head, while the expression of perplexity grew rather than lessened on his face. She saw that there was not only a gash in the left temple, but a furrow on the right side of his head, a swollen red streak where the hair had been burned away. And the black stains on the handkerchief, and the revolver clutched in his hand.

"Philip!" she said softly, reproachfully.

"I don't understand!" he reiterated, and closed his eyes.

She studied him, and the place where he lay, and the dead pony; the two wounds in his head, the bloody handkerchief — and it was only partly clear to her. He had fallen, and been hurt; but Philip, as she knew him, would have made nothing of that cut on his temple. Why, then, had he abandoned the pursuit, and tried to kill himself?

A groan escaped him.

"What is it, Philip?" she asked.

"You're hurting me!" he answered, opening his eyes again.

"Hurting you?" she exclaimed. "No! Where?"

"My leg's broken."

With a sharp cry she moved away from him, and saw that in her eagerness she had pressed against his right leg. For just a moment she was so concerned with the pain she had caused him that she did not realize the full significance of his answer. Then it came to her with a shock. She looked slowly around her: at the black forest on three sides of the little meadow; at the cliff on the other; at the terrible trail down which she

had come, she scarce knew how; and at the storm clouds on Thunder Mountain.

He saw the thought in her face.

"You see, it's no use!" he said. "With a broken leg."

She met his eyes with a clear and steady gaze; and smiled. And that look he could not read.

"Now, then, Philip!" she said at length, rising quietly to her feet. "I'll go to work."

"To work?" he repeated.

"Of course!" she replied, with brave lightness. "There's a lot to do. First, there's your leg."

"Yes, it's broken," he answered sardonically.

"We'll mend it. And the cut on your head needs to be dressed. And I'm dreadfully hungry, and —"

She stopped, and the smile fled from her face, and the strength ran from her limbs.

"I told you. It's no use," said Haig.

But she had one resource of courage of which he was unaware: her faith.

"Well," she answered stoutly, "I've enough in my bundle for one meal anyhow. After that — who knows?"

"Will you give me a drink of water, please?"

She stooped quickly for her hat, the only vessel she had.

"Look in the roll on my saddle," he said. "Murray put some things there."

She glanced around uncertainly; then understood. The saddle was on Trixy still. But Trixy was dead, and she did not like the idea of touching her. She hesitated just the length of time required for an un-

pleasant smile to twist Haig's lips. She saw it, and her face flamed with shame. A fine start she was making! And it was only a dead horse! She walked resolutely to the prostrate body, hurriedly untied the roll of blankets, and returned running.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" she cried, as she unrolled the bundle. "A cup! A pan! And bacon and bread! And matches."

"Murray," said Haig.

"Yes, I know. Mrs. Murray told me, but I'd forgotten."

She ran to the stream, and brought him a cupful of water; and another; and while he drank the second, she picked up his revolver, and carried it to a stone fully as far away as it had been when he crawled for it. He was on the point of calling her back, but thought better of it; to have done that would only have confirmed her suspicions.

"Now then, sir!" she began. "Your leg."

"What about it?"

"We've got to set it."

"That's absurd!"

"Why is it absurd?"

"You can't do it, in the first place."

"But I can. I've seen my father do it."

"It won't heal — in the fix we're in."

"We'll do our best," she rejoined bravely.

"Listen!" he said, with some sternness. "If it should knit, which I doubt, it will take six weeks or two months before I can use it. Do you know what will happen before two months — before one month — before two weeks, even?"

She only looked at him questioningly.

"Snow!" he said shortly.

She could find no answer, unless it were an answer that she dared not give him — yet.

"Well, then!" he said, with an air of finality. "You can't start to-night, of course. It's too late, and there's a storm going up there besides. But to-morrow morning —" He looked up at the cliff and frowned. "Perhaps Tuesday can make it. If he balks, you've got to do it on foot. The mountain let you pass once. Maybe it will spare you again. Maybe! God knows! But it's your only chance. I'm done for, and can't help you. It's sure death for you to stay here. It's sure death to try the trail into the Black Lake country. You have just one chance. You've got to take it to-morrow morning. And God help you for being such a fool!"

She heard him through, and smiled; and he noted, for his own information, that this smile of hers was getting on his nerves. What did she mean by it? There was something very superior about it, though very gentle and indulgent; and a thing or two she had said to him before flashed back into his mind. Was she trying to mother him? The thought made him angry.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Of course I'll not go!" she said simply.

"You will go!" he retorted wrathfully.

She knelt quickly at his side, and took one of his hands between both her own.

"Philip!" she said gently. "I know that — perhaps — it's a foolish question to ask. You mustn't call me silly. But — do you believe in miracles?"

"Miracles be damned!" he blurted out. "I'll see —"

She put her hand over his mouth.

"Listen, Philip!" she went on. "I prayed for a miracle, and it has happened. Perhaps there'll be another; who knows? We'll wait and see. If nothing happens, why — Do you think I'm afraid?"

He made no answer, and she needed none.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HAIG'S ARGUMENT

WHEN she had unsaddled Tuesday, and left him grazing near the "camp," Marion set out with Murray's hatchet and knife to cut splints for Haig's broken leg. Haig watched her run across the meadow, leap the brook, and hurry on to a grove of quaking aspens at the edge of the forest. Then he lay back to consider the logic of the situation, with the following result, which appeared to him unanswerable:

First. The girl yonder had already saved his life once, and was doing her best, though against impossible odds, to save it again. Her motive was one that need not be dwelt upon in this fatal crisis. The fact remained that for him she was facing certain death, and he must do all in his power to save her. That was the starting point from which all reckonings must be made.

Second. His own case was hopeless. Long before he should be able to move from where he lay, the valley would be buried in snow to half the height of those pines yonder. If she remained with him her case would be hopeless too. Death would be inevitable for both of them: death from starvation, from exposure, from cold. They had neither food, nor proper clothing, nor shelter of any kind. The hardiest mountaineer would not dream of attempting to pass eight

or nine months of winter in a place like that, even with his two arms and two legs free. He, with his broken leg, and she, a woman, would not survive an eighth or a ninth of that period.

Third. The chances of rescue. There would be no search for him, he reflected with a grim smile. But for Marion, undoubtedly. To-morrow morning, Marion not having returned, Murray would start out to find her. There was not one chance in a thousand that, at this season, there would be such another day as the one now ending, and ending in storm. But suppose that Murray should make his way across the summit, and find them. Murray could do nothing for a man with a broken leg at the bottom of a gulch with a cliff on one side and miles on miles of mountain forest on the other sides. As for Marion, if she would not go at his, Haig's, command, she would certainly pay little heed to Murray. So Murray would accomplish nothing. However, it would not come to that. Murray would be driven back by the winds. He would ride down to the Park and give the alarm. Search parties would be formed, and they would assail the mountain. But fifty men would be no stronger than one man on Thunder Mountain. It was just possible that some of them might force their way across the flat between storms. But every day that possibility, such as it was, would grow less. It would be madness for the girl to wait. She had crossed the mountain once; she knew the way; and if the winds should permit rescuers to come to her they would permit her to go to them. It was her only chance, however desperate; to remain where she was meant certain death.

Fourth. She would not, it was quite clear, stir from his side as long as he was alive. Therefore he must do quickly what he had tried to do before.

The idea was so familiar to him by now that it required no contemplation. He raised his head, and looked toward the stone where his revolver lay; and then toward the aspen grove where Marion labored. His gaze rested on her for some minutes. It was too late for her to start to-night, even if there were no storm on the mountain. And if he did it now she would face a night of solitude and terror, perhaps would not live through it. He would wait till morning; and when she should have gone for wood, or water —

She came back presently with an arm-load of small limbs she had hacked from the youngest trees. Her left hand bled where she had awkwardly struck it with the hatchet; and there were tears in her eyes, which she tried to conceal from him. He was sorry for her — and angry. It was not his fault; he had done all he could, even to brutality.

"Did you tell Huntington, or his wife, what you were going to do?" was his first speech.

"No. But I sent Mr. Smythe — he rode with me as far as Norton's — I sent him back with a message that I was going to stop the night at Murray's."

"And the Murrays? What did you tell them?"

"That I'd be back before night. But why do you ask?"

"I'm thinking that Smythe is a fool, and Murray is a blockhead."

"They did all they could to stop me," she answered quietly.

She had begun to strip the bark and twigs from the green limbs; and he watched her crude efforts for a moment.

"I think I might manage that part of it," he said at length. "You must build a fire."

She started to obey him, but stopped short, and looked at him in sudden fear and suspicion.

"No, you can trust me with the knife," he said. "I promise."

She handed the limbs and the knife to him; and he saw that her hands trembled.

"You'll find plenty of dead wood at the edge of the forest," he said. "Don't venture far among the trees."

The shadows were deepening along the other side of the meadow, and he watched her a little anxiously while she made half a dozen trips for dry limbs and small chunks of half-rotted logs. And now she felt a curious thrill as she began to employ the knowledge she had gained on her camping expedition. She had never dreamed that it would be so useful to her! And she found new courage in thinking, while she worked, how all her life she had been undergoing preparation, training, education for this hour. She wished that she might run to Philip and tell him all this — and of her faith! But he would not understand her.

Soon a fine fire was crackling on the grass, against one of the largest stones that had fallen from the cliff. Then she brought a small package from her bundle, and made a cup of hot chocolate for Haig and another for herself. This, with a small slice of bread for each of them, made their supper for that day; for such

provisions as they possessed must be treasured scrupulously.

Haig had by this time finished trimming the aspen sticks; and by the fading light of day and the red light of the fire they set to work to mend the broken leg. Between them they knew something of surgery: she by recollecting all that she had seen in her father's office, where she had more than once helped Doctor Gaylord with his needles and bandages; he by recalling experiences on battlefields, in lumber camps, and in various rough places of the world. She brought his blankets, and helped him to move until he lay flat on them, with his head propped against a stone. Then the leg was stripped, and the ordeal began.

It was not the pain so much as the uselessness of it that exasperated Haig; and he was tempted to drive her away from him, and have no more of it. But this, he realized, would only have caused more arguments, and tears, and protestations, and perhaps the revelation of his purpose. So he endured it to satisfy and divert her.

Luckily the fracture was a simple one; and with strips of linen for which Marion sacrificed some of her scanty supply of clothing, and the thin sticks of tough aspen wood, the leg was bound straight and firm.

"If we only knew!" said Marion at last, leaning back to contemplate her work.

"Knew what?" he asked between his teeth.

"If it's right!"

Between pain and rage he could not answer her; and thinking that he was near to a collapse, she ran for water and bathed his face, and gave him a little of the

precious whisky that remained in her flask. After that he lay quiet, and she went to her preparations for the night.

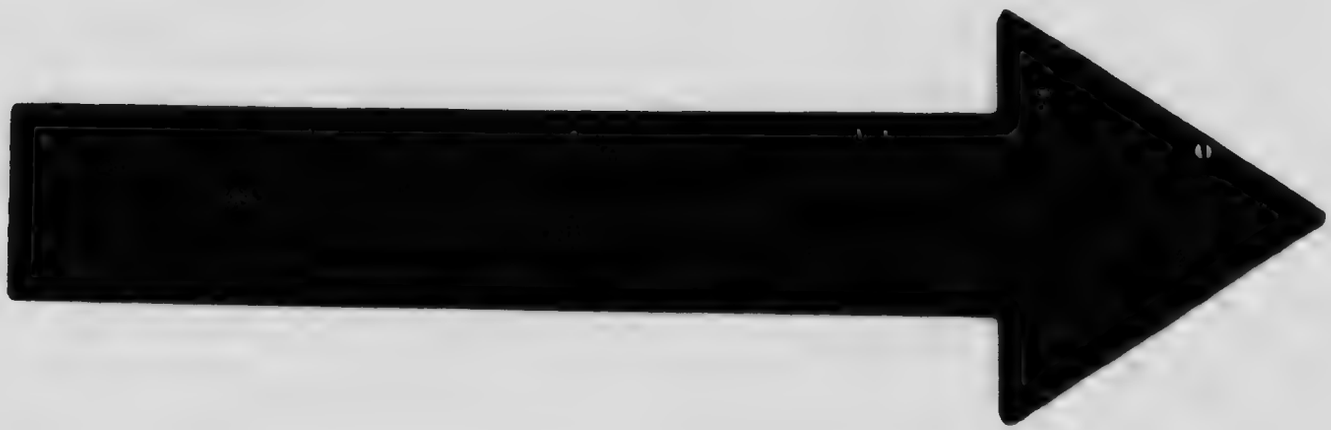
The vale now lay in deep blackness, impenetrable walls of it beyond the red circle of firelight. The cliff made a dim, dark line against the blue-black sky; the forest on the other side a ragged tracery. The stars were few, and far. A low breeze murmured among the pines, and swept softly, but very cold, across the meadow. Marion began to feel the chill; and having wrapped Philip's blanket tight around him, and spread over him the leather coat she had found in his bundle, she heaped more wood on the fire, and sat down before it, with her blankets around her, and her rifle at her side, to watch and wait.

She was very tired, but she dared not lie down to sleep. A long time she sat there, glancing now and then at Haig, where he lay very still, and oftener out into the blackness. But drowsiness gradually overcame her, and her head sank forward on her uplifted knees.

She was awakened by a terrifying cry that rang shivering across the valley. She started to her feet, and listened. It must have been a dream, she thought. No! There it was again — a cry that started low, like a child's peevish wail, and ended in a piercing scream. She grabbed up her rifle, and stood peering into the darkness.

"Don't be afraid!" said the voice of Haig from the edge of the firelight. "It's only a bobcat. He'll not come near the fire."

"Thank you — Philip!" she answered. Then, with a nervous laugh: "It did frighten me, though!"



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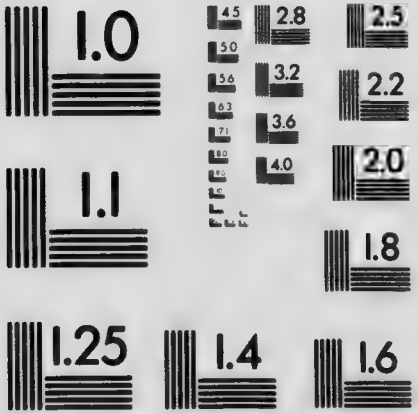

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She stood a moment, still listening. But the cry came no more.

"Aren't you sleeping?" she asked softly.

"No."

With trembling limbs, and eyes fixed on the darkness from whence had come the scream, she stepped cautiously to the pile of wood, and threw more limbs and bits of logs into the blaze. Then she seated herself again, resolved that she would not fall asleep. But presently she started to her feet in another panic at sight of a dark form moving in the blackness. But it was only Tuesday, coming nearer to the fire, as if he too had been alarmed by the wild beast's cry. She settled down once more to her vigil, her rifle across her lap.

In spite of her resolution, her head sank to her knees again, and she was aroused at length by the cold. It bit through the blankets and clothing into the flesh of her limbs; sharp shivers ran up and down her back; and she was very miserable. Rising stiffly, she walked a while before the fire until she stumbled from weariness; then sat down again, and nodded, only to be waked by the frost gnawing at her flesh. Again and again she slept and woke in accentuated misery. But finally she saw, with unspeakable relief, that the stars were paling in their blue-black vault. She turned toward Thunder Mountain, and watched the dim line of the cliff sharpening against the whitening sky. Yet all was blackness in the gulch, and it seemed a long time before a soft gray light began to steal in upon the red light of the fire, and a new crispness came into the air. She waited until she could make out the forms of trees across the

valley, shrouded in thin morning mist, before she threw the last few sticks of wood on the dying fire, and crept to the side of Haig, where she lay down close beside him, with her blankets wrapped around her. There she fell into a heavy sleep, and did not waken until the sun, rising above Thunder Mountain, shone warm in her face.

For some seconds she lay luxuriating in the warmth that seemed incredible after that night of cold and terror. Then she moved softly, raised herself on one elbow, and looked at Philip. He slept. His face was haggard under his three days' growth of beard. She leaned over him, and pressed her lips ever so lightly to his forehead. He did not stir.

Tuesday grazed a few yards away; the vale lay green and peaceful in the sunlight; and from the pine woods, where that hideous cry had lifted in the night, came now only the gentle murmur of the breeze in the massed foliage. By contrast with the chill horror of the night, the scene was positively exhilarating; and Marion rose to her work with hope throbbing through every vein, and courage singing along every nerve of her body.

First she fetched wood to renew the fire, now only a heap of smouldering embers. That done, she went to make her toilet in the brook, with the soap and towel she had stowed in her bundle for the shooting trip. Poor Seth! she thought, with a momentary pang; he would not get the deer he wanted, after all. And by this thought was set in motion a little current of regrets that filled her mind until it was diverted by the stream. She had intended only to wash her face and hands,

now grimy after her labors at the fire. But chance led her to a deep, still pool with a bottom of fine sand and a tiny shore of pebbles that seemed to have been designed for bathing. Temptation seized her, and on the very impulse, seeing that a clump of willows screened her from the camp, she eagerly undressed, and plunged into the water, uttering quick gasps at the cold contact, and short-clipped shrieks of pleasure.

And so, behold a marvel! Three days ago, in the security and familiarity of the Park, where no hardships or perils threatened, and where she knew that Philip was safe in his cottage across the ridge, and that her own pink bedroom awaited her at night, so deep was she in dejection that nothing could have induced an outburst of mere physical enjoyment such as this. But now, while Philip lay on his blankets, a prisoner in that narrow vale, and death stood at her side uncovered and undisguised, her spirits rose as they had never risen since her confession on Mount Avalanche, and if Haig had been listening he might have heard her low laughter across the meadow.

Had she yet failed to realize her situation? Or was it that tragedy had put on its comic mask, and laughed at death? The truth is simple. Her faith had triumphed over what seemed to be insuperable obstacles; and she was with Philip, for better or for worse. A miracle had been wrought; and miracles are not meaningless, or idle, or without purpose. It was a feeling perhaps unknown to man, who is merely a reasoning creature, much given to material consideration of natural causes and effects, and so compelled by his limitations to grope in outer darkness. And it was

not so much a feeling as an instinct, and not so much an instinct as a law, of which she was the involuntary instrument. Her purpose was so strong within her that there was no need of thought; and so she did not think.

Leaping to the pebbly bank, she rubbed herself swiftly with the towel, and felt the glow of health rushing through her body, all pink and gleaming in the sun. Then she dressed, and combed her hair; rinsed and wrung out the towel, and hung it on the willow-limbs to dry; and started back toward the camp in the highest spirits, and eager for service. And then, at twenty paces, she was stricken cold and rigid by the sight that met her unsuspecting eyes.

Haig had left his blankets, and was now dragging himself like a wounded animal along the earth. Already he had covered more than half the distance to the rock on which his revolver lay; and it seemed as if she would stand rooted there in helpless horror until he reached it. Then, with an incautious cry, she bounded forward. Haig heard her, and flung himself toward the stone with reckless determination. Where he had inches, Marion had yards to go; it was a race that might, in another age, have done credit to the ingenuity of a Roman emperor. If Philip was mad with pain and anger, Marion was frantic with fear and love. It seemed to her that the turf gripped her feet, that the wind in her face would strangle her, that her skirts were leaden sheets around her knees. And she barely resisted falling in a senseless heap when, at ten yards from the goal, she saw that she would be too late.

He beat her to the rock by merely a few seconds; but

he was fairly spent. His fingers bled where he had dug them into the sand; the sweat rolled down his face; and exhaustion bound him as with bands of iron. Yet he was able to reach for the gun, and clutch it; and with a final effort that seemed to tear the heart from his breast, he dragged the weapon under him, pressed the muzzle upward, pulled the trigger, at the very instant that Marion threw herself upon him.

There was a muffled report, the fumes stung their eyes and nostrils, and for a moment both lay still. Then Marion felt a movement under her, and guessed that Haig was fumbling with the revolver. An indescribable energy seized her, something tigerish in its fury, and beyond her own proper powers, so that she flung him over on his back as if he had been a child in strength and size. With both hands she gripped the wrist below the clutched revolver, and while she held it away from his body she drew her own body over his, and threw herself on his extended arm, between his hand and his breast.

There was a savage struggle still, the man affirming his right to die, and the woman denying it. But the issue could not be long in doubt; for Haig's strength was at the ebb, while Marion's flowed in from earth and air and sky, from the future and from the past. And she wore him down at last, until the revolver dropped from his grasp, his eyelids closed, his limbs relaxed, and he lay still. Waiting a moment for certainty, she cautiously loosened one of her hands from his wrist, and grabbed the revolver, and flung it with all her might. Then, seeing it land twenty feet away on the grass, she rolled away from him, and sat up panting,

hollow-eyed, disheveled, and trembling on the verge of a collapse.

For some seconds there was no sound but their labored breathing; and not until Haig opened his eyes and looked at her, with a hunted, baffled, and still defiant expression in their somber depths, did Marion break down. Then suddenly, after a premonitory quivering of her chin, she buried her face in her hands, and wept without more effort at restraint, in utter abandonment to her agony. Haig watched, at first in anger, and then in some confusion of emotions. Once before he had looked upon her thus bowed and shaken; and now as then he felt a strange upheaval, and an unfathomable sensation that had no likeness to anything he had ever before experienced. He wanted very much to speak to her, but could not trust himself; and after all, what was there to be said?

It was she who rescued him from irresolution. She dropped her hands from her face, and cried out in a voice that was broken with sobbing: "Why, Philip, why did you do that?"

"Why?" he asked, in something like amazement.

"Yes."

"I've already told you why."

"But — no — you haven't told me!"

"It was to save you — for one thing."

"To save me?"

"I told you that your only chance is to go at once."

"But I told you I wouldn't go!"

"I know. That's the reason."

"But — don't you know, Philip, that — don't you

see that — if you killed yourself you'd — kill me too?"

There should have been no necessity for these words. Perhaps any other man in the world, certainly most men of far less intelligence and less acuteness of feeling, would have known long ago just what she meant. He knew, indeed, that this girl loved him; but he did not believe that she or any other woman was capable of the sacrifice implied in her answer.

"You mean that — you would have —" He hesitated.

"Yes."

There ensued a silence that fell like a mist between them, through which neither knew the way. She saw that he had begun, by ever so little, to understand; and she feared to say more lest a wrong word should overtake a right one. As for Haig, his incredulity persisted notwithstanding the unquestionable sincerity of her speech. He did not doubt that she contemplated, in this moment of emotion, the complete and final sacrifice. But he was quite convinced that she would take a different view of the situation when the test should come. She did not yet appreciate, he argued, the peril of their position; she had not realized the hazard of her adventure or she never would have undertaken it; and undoubtedly she still thought there would be a way out for them. Under such a delusion it was easy for her, he concluded, to talk about dying with him. But she was tragically in error. His eyes lifted to the cliff. She should have been up there on her return hours ago. Now it was too late again; for the clouds were black and ugly on the summit, and a distant roaring came to

his ears; and he knew what was happening or in preparation in the middle of the flat. But he must find a way to send her up that trail at dawn the next day; and his gaze dropped to where the revolver lay just visible in the thin grass into which she had thrown it.

CHAPTER XXV

DIANA

STILL no speech came to either of them. After a while Marion rose silently, and went about her work. First, however, she sought the revolver in the grass, and carried it, with her rifle, to the clump of willows by the brook, where both weapons were safely beyond the present limits of Philip's powers. Then she returned to him with her towel, one end of it wetted and soaped.

"May I, please?" she asked, smiling down at him.

"If you wish," he answered.

She knelt, and began to wash the grime from his face, to cleanse the wound on his head, and readjust the bandage. Then his hands, after another trip to the stream to rub out the soiled end of the towel; and she was still busy with one of them, when she started back with a cry. His coat had opened wider, and she saw that his shirt was stained with blood. She had forgotten the revolver-shot!

"It's nothing," said Haig. "Only a flesh wound, I think."

"But why didn't you tell me!" she cried, almost with anger in her alarm.

"It doesn't matter, does it?"

"Let me see it, quick!" she commanded.

He looked at her a moment, then opened the front of his flannel shirt and of the undershirt, and disclosed a flesh wound where the bullet had cut a streak across his chest. Marion bent close, and touched it with her fingers.

"Oh!" she sighed at last, in deep relief.

Haig's reply was a laugh of which the irony did not escape her.

"Philip!" she cried reproachfully.

"Well, isn't it rather droll — and ludicrous, when you come to think of it? First, Sunnysides' punch in my stomach. And now, with my head cut open by a stone, and a broken leg, and two bullet-wounds — I've still got a splendid appetite. I ought to be on exhibition somewhere!"

His sardonic humor hurt her worse than his anger; and she went quickly to the brook to cleanse the towel again. Returning presently, she washed the new wound, and bandaged it; then examined the splints on the broken leg to assure herself that, as nearly as she could determine, no serious damage had been done to it by his reckless crawl; and finally brought his blankets, and insisted on making a sort of bed for him. After that she cooked two slices of bacon, and on this, with a little bread, they made their first meal of the day. And this brought her to the next and most pressing problem.

"Will you help me think, Philip?" she asked, when they had eaten.

"About what?"

"Food."

"What's in the larder?"

She smiled at his tone, in spite of her own seriousness.

"Bacon — perhaps enough for three days, with the bread, if we don't eat much; and chocolate for four or five breakfasts. That's all."

"And then?"

"Are there deer in those forests, do you think?"

"Very likely. This is an un-hunted country, I imagine."

"Great!" she cried.

"What do you propose to do? Whistle for them?"

She could afford to smile at that.

"Didn't you see my rifle?"

"Just now — yes. What's it for?"

"You'll see."

"Diana of Thunder Mountain, eh? Well, I'm ready to admit you're some huntress. But deer! That's another thing."

The color flooded her cheeks.

"Cousin Seth taught me to shoot," she answered, turning her face away. "I killed a deer on Mount Avalanche."

"But where did Cousin Seth learn to shoot? The last time he —"

"Please, Philip!"

"Well, when you've brought down your deer, what will you do with it?"

The color deserted her face at that.

"I watched him do it," she said, shuddering at the recollection.

"But you can't do that alone."

"I've got to," she replied simply. And then, on

a sudden thought: "There should be grouse too, shouldn't there?"

"Perhaps."

"I learned to kill grouse with my rifle."

He looked at her with a wicked grin. This time he had her!

"How many cartridges have you?" he asked.

She ran for her belt, and counted the cartridges.

"Twenty-seven."

"So. If you never miss, you'll get twenty-seven grouse. That would mean twenty-seven meals. One meal a day, twenty-seven days. I'd still be on my back, our ammunition would be gone, and —"

"Don't!" she cried, in tears. "I wasn't thinking."

"Never mind!" he replied, almost gently. "But we'll deny ourselves the grouse."

"Yes, it's got to be the deer. I'll begin now."

"No, there's something else that must be done first."

"What is it?"

"We've got to move."

"For shelter, you mean?"

"Partly. But look there!"

He pointed to the dead body of Trixy.

"It will be easier — and perhaps even nicer — to move me than poor Trixy. See that big pine yonder — the one that stands out from the forest? Well, you and Tuesday must drag me there."

"But how?"

He explained his plan to her, and she set herself at once to executing it. And her spirits rose again; for she thought he had abandoned his desperate resolution. So, indeed, he had — for the moment. But he had

deliberately beguiled her; their situation he knew to be quite unchanged in its inevitable termination, since a food supply would save them from starvation only to deliver them to the snow; and he must disarm her of suspicion in order to find a way to send her back on the trail. For he had reflected on the implication of tragic finality in the speech that had surprised and disturbed him; and he did not doubt that when the time should come, and she should find herself alone, her high resolve would prove to have been mere emotional exaggeration.

Mounted on Tuesday, Marion attacked the boughs of a small pine with the hatchet until she had severed three large branches, to which she tied Haig's rope, and hauled them back to the camp. Of these branches Haig contrived a crude drag, on which he crawled, and lay flat; the free end of the rope was hitched to the horn of Tuesday's saddle; and the journey was begun. Twice the saddle slipped, and progress was interrupted while Marion tightened the cinches. Once the drag itself came to pieces, and Haig was left sprawling on the ground. But eventually, with no more serious injury to Haig than a bruised elbow, not counting his torn clothing, they reached the goal.

There Marion made a wide bed against the exposed top roots of the tree, filling the spaces among the pine boughs with moss, and placing the two saddles at the head for pillows. Night had come before she had completed this labor, and gathered another supply of dead limbs and rotted logs, and cooked their meager supper. Then she wrapped Haig in his blankets, and rolled herself in her own, and lay down at his side. What with

watching and replenishing the fire, and listening to night-cries heard or imagined, and waking from restless slumber chilled to the bone, she slept as little as on the preceding night, and was glad of the dawn, which came peacefully enough on the heels of a storm that raged on Thunder Mountain and sent a cold and beating rain upon the valley.

This day brought its own bitter disappointment. After her bath in the clear pool among the willows, and their mere taste of bacon and bread in the name of breakfast, and a promise exacted from Haig, as a condition of her leaving him, that he would do nothing of which she would disapprove, she set out to get her deer. Rifle on shoulder, and eyes alert, she skirted the edge of the wood along the base of the cliff, through tall grasses of a golden green, among yellowing aspen groves, and under a fair blue sky. But presently she plunged into the thick of the forest, of which the trees towered to a height exceeding that of any she had ever seen before. In their tops the breeze was singing sonorously, but among their massive boles the silence was so tense that twigs cracking under her feet sounded like gun-shots echoing through the dim aisles.

For some hours she wandered fruitlessly in that dark labyrinth, not only mindful of Philip's warning that she must not penetrate too deep into its depth, but fearful on her own account of an encounter with some such wild beast as that whose cry had terrified her. In time the hollow indifference of the woods began to weigh upon her spirits, which had been high and hopeful on her setting out. Worn out at last, she was just on the point of turning back toward the camp, defeated, when she

came upon an open space, a lovely little glade, in which the grass grew rank and green, unripened by the sun. She started to cross it, but stopped suddenly, staring straight ahead. In the very middle of the lush and silent glade, a young doe rose swiftly to its feet, and looked at her. Marion stood and looked at the doe. Then there was a streak of pale yellow across the grass, the forest closed around it, and the doe was gone. Thereupon, Marion remembered her rifle, and saw with something like surprise, to begin with, that it was pointed foolishly toward the ground. She gazed at it a moment, then sat plump down on the mossy earth, and cried.

"Oh, what a fool!" she groaned. "What a poor, silly little fool! I ought to starve, starve, starve!"

And on the words the hunger that she had bravely kept back rose and punished her. To be hungry in a world of plenty, where she had only to reach out and help herself! To think of Philip, hungry too, and depending on her, on her boasted prowess! Humiliation scorched her like a flame. And this was Marion Gaylord!

When she had recovered a little, she made directly for the open strip, having no more heart for her task, and nerving herself to confess the truth to Philip. Coming out upon the knoll through thick underbrush, she was startled by the leap of a rabbit from under her very feet; and before she was aware of what she was doing, she had thrown up her rifle, and fired. There was really no aim; the action was a gesture merely; and if she had tried to hit the rabbit she would have undoubtedly missed it clean. But the unlucky little beast,

happening in the path of Marion's angry disgust, turned a somersault in the air, and fell dead.

"Of course!" cried Marion. "Of course I can kill rabbits." Then mercilessly: "A rabbit a day for twenty-seven days —" And rage choked her.

But she picked up her rabbit, and walked on. In half an hour she reached the camp, strode straight to the pine tree under which Haig lay, and held up before him the puny prize.

"Now I know you're proud of me!" she exclaimed, while her face crimsoned.

Haig smiled indulgently. It was a little better than he had expected.

"Don't be downcast!" he said. "I didn't think you'd get a deer the first day. You didn't even see one, I suppose."

"But I did, though! I had one right under my eyes, not thirty feet away. And what do you think I did?"

"Stood and looked at it, of course. That's buck fever."

"But it was only a tiny little doe!"

"Doe fever then, which is probably worse, if I know anything about —"

"That will do, Philip! You're laughing at me."

"Not at all. You've brought home something to eat, and that's more than I can do. Bunny looks big and fat. He'll make a fine dinner, and leave something for to-morrow."

"Thank you, Philip!" she said gratefully. "You make me feel as if I were not such a failure after all."

"If you'll trust me with the knife," he said in a tone

that took some of the edge off her satisfaction, "I'l
clean him for you."

She gave him the knife reluctantly, and did no
leave his side until he had finished cleaning and cuttin
up the rabbit, when he handed the knife back to her wit
a gesture that made her blush again. Two things sh
did not know: that he had a knife in his pocket muc
better suited to his secret purpose; and that his purpos
was a purpose no longer. But even he was not ye
aware of this last.

It was not the next day, but the third, when the rabbi
had been eaten to the bone, and the pangs of hunge
prodded her, that Marion restored herself in her ow
eyes. In the edge of the forest, not more than tw
miles from the camp, she detected a mere brown patc
in the browning bush. This time she did not forge
her rifle. The brown patch moved just as she pulle
the trigger; but when she reached the spot, in a feve
of anxiety, she fairly shrieked to the wilderness. Fo
there in the grass, still jerking spasmodically in it
death agony, lay a doe, a larger one than that she ha
seen in the glade. No more "one a day for twenty
seven days!"

What followed haunted her dreams for many nigh
thereafter — a repulsive and sickening ordeal. Sh
had seen Huntington do it, but then she had been ab
to turn her face away; and her hands — But necessit
responsibility, and pride, and perhaps some primitiv
instinct also, nerved her to the task. And she staggere
back to camp, and stood before Philip, white an
trembling, but triumphant.

"Take a drink of whisky!" ordered Haig sharply.

She obeyed him, gulping down the last of the precious contents of her flask.

"It's down there — covered with leaves!" she gasped out at length. "Will anything — disturb it before I can — take Tuesday and the rope?"

"Do you mean you've cleaned the whole deer?" he asked curiously.

She nodded, still shuddering.

"Well, you're a brick!" he said heartily. Then he added: "I thought perhaps a bobcat had stolen your — rabbit."

She laughed with him, and then was off with Tuesday to bring her quarry home. She was not strong enough to lift and fasten the carcass on the horse's back; but the route was through clean grass along the cliff, and Tuesday made short work of that, with the deer dragged at the end of the rope.

They had no salt, but there were a few rinds of bacon that Haig had told Marion to keep, and these were made to serve for seasoning. That venison, moreover, needed nothing to make it palatable; for they were ravenously hungry. Sprawled before the fire like savages, they feasted on a huge steak, broiled on two willow sticks, and well-browned on the outside at the start so that the tenderness was retained; and for an hour forgot. For so the stomach, at once the tyrant and the slave, has sometimes its hour of triumph, when heart and soul and brain are its willing captives, and the starkest fears and forebodings lose their sway, and death itself, though visible and near, has no power to ferment the grateful juices of the body.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SNOW

IN the night they were awakened by a terrific outburst on the mountain top, surpassing all they had yet heard since their arrival in the valley. The forest roared under the onslaughts of the wind that swept down through the gorge as through a funnel. Protected though the camp was, in a measure, fierce gusts now and then assailed it, and later the rain came, almost in torrents, beating through the canopy of foliage, and half-flooding the bed.

Marion, rising to renew the fire, felt that a sharp change had come in the atmosphere. It was colder than any night they had yet endured. Wrapped again in her blankets, she was unable to keep warm. Her feet, near the fire, were too hot, while her back and shoulders ached as if they had been packed in ice. Turn which way she would, on her back, on her side, or face downward, there was no relief from that acid cold. She did not complain, but cried softly, trying to hold back her sobs so that he should not hear her.

"You're cold," he said, hearing her nevertheless.

"A little — not very," she answered bravely.

But he knew very well how keenly she was suffering. His injured leg pained him almost beyond endurance, as if the frost had been concentrated there. There was nothing he could say or do for her or for himself.

Toward morning, the fury of the storm having abated, they slept a little, fitfully and uneasily, in the half-insensibility to suffering that complete exhaustion brings. But they were glad when the first gray light of morning stole in among the shadows and touched their eyelids. With one accord, as if in a common apprehension, and moved by a single fear, they raised their heads, and at the first glance about them, sat up staring.

The meadow lay white under its first coverlet of snow, the trees were draped in their winter mantles, their very bed had its downy quilt of snowflakes that had sifted through the branches of the tree.

"It's come," said Haig simply.

"Yes," she answered, in a voice that echoed a tragic calm.

"But it was due."

"Seth kept saying we'd have a hard and early winter."

"Huntington's not such a fool as he looks," retorted Haig drily, as he lay back to look up resignedly into the foliage, where white now mingled with the green.

For some time there was no more speech. Marion arose, and went silently about her work. She heaped wood on the fire until the flames leaped high, and the heat began to drive out the settled chill from her limbs, and she could move again without dull pain. Then to the brook; but her baths in the pool were ended. She washed face and hands, and brought back the wet towel for Philip. And breakfast was eaten almost in silence, and without appetite; for the good venison that had so rejoiced them the night before had already lost its flavor.

"Do you see the circles on the trees yonder, where the moss begins?" asked Haig at length.

"Yes," Marion answered.

"That's the snow line. It will lie thirty feet deep here."

She had no answer to that. But she was thinking. There must be a way. She had no idea what it would be; but there must be some way out of it.

When the camp had been cleaned up, and the pan and cup had been washed and put aside, and the fire replenished, she brought her rifle from its place behind the tree.

"I'm going for a walk," she said.

"Where?"

"I don't know. Down along the cliff perhaps. I may see another deer."

"Yes. You might as well. Deer meat will keep — longer than we —"

He checked the unnecessary speech. She rewarded him with a smile and left him.

And now he faced a curious situation within himself. He saw clearly, but strangely without sensation, that it was too late for Marion to attempt the passage of the mountain. Whatever chance she might have had before — and that was perhaps even less than the one in a thousand of which he had spoken — she had now no chance at all, supposing that he should force her to seek it by measures of desperation. And why had he delayed? He did not know. Had he weakened? Had his injuries taken something from his courage? He drew his treasured knife from his pocket, opened the largest of the three keen blades, and passed it slowly but

lightly across his wrist. No; his hand was steady; he could do it without a tremor. He could have done it yesterday, the day before, or any day. Well, then; had he become sceptical of such a solution of his problem? Perhaps. Six times in his life he had attempted that solution, and always he had failed. And yet, what could have thwarted him when Marion was far away in the forest, and he lay quiet and undisturbed on his blankets, in full possession of his faculties?

By such process of elimination he arrived at the final question: was it she? Was it this girl that now stayed his hand, in spite of all his logic and clear vision and resolution? This girl, with her foolish faith, and misplaced love, and futile talk of miracles? Was it written that they should die together — written in some volume of the book of life into which he had never looked? Or was she right? And would there be —

He looked out again upon the gleaming whiteness of the meadow, at the snow line on the pines, at the remorseless mountain. He passed slowly in review again the chances of a rescue, the chances of their wintering in that (soon-to-be) snowbound valley, the chances of a — miracle. And he shook his head. The odds were beyond all reckoning; their fate was now as certain as if the cliff yonder, rent by another cataclysm, had tumbled down upon them while they slept. But he had known this in the very hour of his awakening to find her kneeling at his side; he had delayed giving her the one chance of escape. And so, was it because she had commanded him and he had unconsciously obeyed?

It was mystery; it was enigma. He tried to think if he had erred in any way, if there was any fault to

be attributed to him. No; he had dealt more than fairly with this girl; he had spoken frankly and brutally; he had never once consciously, by word or look, enticed her. Unconsciously, perhaps; but how could he ever have foreseen such consequences of the infatuation of which he had become slowly and incredulously informed? He would have gone raging out of the Park, between two suns (and Thursby be damned!), if he had ever dreamt of this tragic end of her midsummer madness.

For two hours he lay thinking, torturing his brain for an explanation of this mystery, an understanding of this coil. And he was no nearer a solution than at the beginning, when his thoughts were interrupted by Marion. She came running out of the forest — not running, but fairly bounding, as if her feet were too light to rest on earth. Her face was flushed, her eyes danced with excitement. But then, seeing his grave and questioning face, she stopped short in front of him, suddenly embarressed.

"Well?" he asked gently.

"Would — a cave do?"

Her voice trembled between timidity and shortness of breath.

"A cave?"

"Yes."

"What kind of a cave?"

"A big cave — really two caves joined together."

"Where?"

"In the cliff — down there."

She pointed in the direction from which she had come at full speed.

"How high above the level of the valley?"

She stared at him, and was again embarrassed.

"I forgot that!" she said, in deep chagrin. "But wait, please!" She looked around her. "I think — I know what you mean! It's higher up than the marks on the trees there, surely it is!"

"Tell me about it!"

"It's only a little way from here. There's a narrow, clear space all along between the forest and the cliff, where the grass grows high. But there's one place — I missed it before, when I was just looking for deer — where the cliff — How can I describe it? It sinks in, and there's a slope up to it, solid rock. And at the top of the slope I saw a black hole, and got off my pony to look in. The slope is easy to climb. Tuesday climbed it with me. The mouth of the cave is partly hidden by a rock that sticks out so that you can see opening only from one side. The entrance is no bigger than the door of your stable. I was afraid at first, but —"

"You thought of your miracle," he suggested, with a smile.

"I knew something must be done, so I held my rifle ready, thinking it might be a wild beasts' den, and listened a minute, and went in. There's the big cave first, as large as the sitting-room and kitchen together at Cousin Seth's, and there's a smaller one at the side, with a narrow opening between them. The small one has an opening outside too, just big enough for me to squeeze through, and look out on the forest below."

"Was it cold in there? Did the wind blow through?"

"No, I think not. It seemed very dry and warm."

He looked at her intently, and so strangely that she blushed again, she knew not why.

"Who are you, anyhow?" he asked, in a curious tone.

"I?"

"Yes, you?"

"I don't understand," she faltered in confusion.

"No matter!" he said. "We'll try the cave."

He had no faith in the experiment. Even with food and shelter, there was still the cold that would steadily sap their strength, and stretch them lifeless before half the winter should have passed. But she should have her way; it would divert her mind from the inevitable; and they would, at least, be doing all their best. The trip to the cave would be hell for him, in his condition, but all that would be, at its worst, soon ended.

A whole day being needed for the removal, they ventured to wait until the following morning. Storms raged through all the night on Thunder Mountain, and they woke again in utter wretchedness to find another and heavier sheet of snow upon the meadow.

But Marion was soon up and at work in eagerness and hope. The fire and the broiled venison renewed them; and even the snow offered something by way of compensation, for Haig's journey on the freshly constructed drag was smoother over the snow than it had been in the first instance over the stone-littered earth. The ascent to the opening of the cave was, however, another matter; and there was imminent danger of Tuesday's sliding backward on the slippery rock, and crushing Haig beneath him. Twice, indeed, such a fatal accident was narrowly averted, and a less sure-footed

animal than Tuesday would have resolved all Haig's doubts in one swift catastrophe. But there was no alternative, and Haig at length lay safe enough, though racked and exhausted, at the mouth of the cave; and when he had rested he raised himself on his elbows and looked around him.

The top of the slope was almost level, and made a kind of porch in front of their new abode, about thirty feet in length and of half that measurement in its greatest width. Haig calculated the height of the platform above the valley — fully forty feet. Below was the strip of grass, and then the forest towering high above them, protecting the cave, in some degree, from the winds that would come roaring down the gulch. At this height they should be able, in all probability, to defy the snow. With a sufficient store of food and fuel, and any kind of luck, there would have been — God! Was there a chance?

With his back to the wall! He had always been at his best against long odds. None of the adventures of the ten years that he counted as his life had ever been for any kind of gain; and the finest of them had been those in which there were the most tight places. So this coming struggle with the elements, though it should be a trial not of valor but of endurance and resourcefulness, lacking swift action and a culmination in one stirring hour, would once have allured him like a splendid game. And even now, for one instant, while he sat there keenly counting the forces on one side and the other, the pride of battle lighted up his features, and for that instant he was himself again. But a cruel and timely twinge in his injured leg recalled him to

realities. His back was not to the wall; it was flat on the ground. He could not walk, he could not stand; and for weeks to come he would continue to be as helpless as in that moment. To endure a siege of eight months in the cave its garrison must have huge stores of food and fuel; pine boughs and moss in lieu of bedding; solid barricades at the entrances; and countless makeshifts for the comforts that were denied. And before he should be able to stir it would be too late. No, it was an idle dream; a month would see the end of both of them. So he lay back again, and looked up vacantly into the cold, blue sky.

But Marion, standing at one side and watching him, had seen that flicker of the fire within, and was grateful for it beyond all reason or belief. It was all she needed. Her hands were already raw and bleeding, but she would work them to the bone if he would only guide and advise and comfort her; and she knew now that she could trust him, since there was no longer any question whether she should go or stay.

All that day was spent in bringing up fresh boughs and moss for their beds, and in making them against the wall of the cavern where draughts would be the least likely to sweep over them; in bestowing their meager belongings; in hanging the venison from sticks thrust into a crevice in the rock; in finding the best place for the fire that must never be allowed to go down, and in planning the storage of food and fuel.

Marion had no pressing anxiety about food, now that she had brought in her first deer; but fuel was a different matter. To her own appreciation of the problem Haig, that evening after dinner, added some calcula-

tions that revealed it to her in its baldest aspects. The morning, too, disclosed another layer of snow upon the valley. The winter was coming on without pity, and each succeeding day would see its lines drawn a little closer round them. There was not an hour, not a moment to be lost.

At dawn she began, with Tuesday and the rope, to haul dead limbs and logs, the largest she was able to handle, going far at first in order to leave the nearest supplies for the last harvesting in deep snow. Under Haig's instructions, she filled all the space in the caves that would not be actually needed for their living quarters. Then she built the logs into a square and solid pile on the platform at one side of the entrance. These were not logs in any formidable sense, being for the most part half-rotted fragments of tree trunks that had long been decaying in the mold. But they were dry now, after the summer, and they made excellent slow-burning fuel. The dead limbs she cut up into small sticks, and filled the interstices of the heap, and all the space between it and the wall of rock. And eventually the whole platform was covered, and the slope on each side, until there was no longer room for Tuesday to mount to it, and barely room for Marion herself.

In the meantime, varying her exertions, she made several trips into the woods for deer. After many disappointments, she succeeded, before the snow became too deep for further expeditions, in bringing back to the cave a splendid buck and three young does. Haig made for her a rabbit snare, and taught her how to set it, and with this device she had the luck to add a dozen rabbits to their store. And all this time she was piling

up every stick of wood that she could find space for, even making a great heap at the foot of the slope to be drawn upon before the snow should cover it.

Always the snow fell, steadily, remorselessly. Every night it snowed, and every day more or less, with intervals of brilliant sunshine. The wind blew with increasing violence, tossing the snow into huge drifts upon the meadow, which Marion still saw sometimes in her wood gathering, and sifting it in level masses among the trees, and flinging it in great banks against the cliff. Up and up crept the drifts and banks and levels until there came a day when she could do no more.

And that day it seemed that she could have done no more in any kind of weather, under any inspiration or necessity. The record of what she did is but a footnote to the page of what she suffered. Time after time she had sunk down in the snow and lain there exhausted until strength came to her again from somewhere, and then had risen *manfully* to her work. For it was a man's work she did, with a courage as much greater than a man's as her strength was less. She was strong, for a woman; she had lived all her life much out of doors; and she had entered upon this ordeal in perfect health. But her willingness outsped her powers; and when the snow had spared her by driving her into the cave, she fairly staggered and groped and leaned against the wall, and knew that if she should now collapse she would never rise again. But even in that climax of her suffering, when for a moment she dared not move, in fear of toppling over on the floor, and could not keep back her sobs, there was an answer ready when Haig called to her across the cave.

"What is it, Marion?" he asked softly.

"Tuesday!" she answered chokingly.

"What about Tuesday?"

"He's a good horse."

"Yes."

"He never balked or — hesitated. He never threw me — but once, and that wasn't his fault. It was —"

She stopped. And out of what black depths, and across what vistas of hope and despair and love and anguish, she looked back to that scene in the golden summer, in the Forbidden Pasture.

"Yes, I remember," said Haig.

Then she told him brokenly how she had just said farewell to Tuesday; how he stood at the foot of the slope, thin as a specter, belly-deep in snow, his nose lifted inquiringly toward her.

"Good-by, Tuesday!" she cried; and fled stumbling up the slope, her hands on her ears to shut out his plaintive whinny.

Haig watched her narrowly, and was not deceived. Through the first few days of Marion's struggles he had lain on his pallet in almost complete indifference, in full acceptance of the fate that awaited them; not callous to her sufferings, but resigned, as he thought, to endure what could not be prevented. Having resolved to humor her, he went from the extreme of resistance to the extreme of submission, and hardened his heart to endure what galled and humiliated and degraded him. Then anger seized him once more,— anger at Marion, anger at himself, anger at Thursby, anger at circumstances, chance and destiny: blinding and suffocating anger. To have been brought to this shameful state, to

lie there watching a woman, a mere girl, perform these menial tasks for him — for him who had execrated and despised and scorned her sex — for him who had accepted such services grudgingly even from men — for him who had stalked around the world in defiant independence, indebted to no man and obligated to no woman: this was odious and intolerable. And it must be tolerated!

Marion knew nothing of this fiery ordeal through which Haig came. Even in the fiercest and most maddening moment of his agony, when honor and pride and self-respect were being reduced to ashes, he did not fail to realize that to cry out, to rave or curse or denunciate, would only be to add something cowardly and contemptible to the sum of his disgrace. He did not even cast a stealthy glance toward his revolver, where it lay in a niche in the cavern wall, though Marion was out in the snow somewhere, and could not have stopped him if he had crawled to seize it. That, too, would have been an act of cowardice and of infamy; and something deep within him now continually spoke for her, and for whatever it was she stood for in this chaos that was the end of all.

His fury slowly passed, and he had but emerged from its strangely purifying fire into a calm that was well-nigh as terrible, when she entered sobbing into the cave to tell him the pitiable little lie that all her visible distress was for a pony to whom she had said farewell. He saw her presently totter forward to put more fuel on the fire and begin to prepare their evening meal. With eyes from which the smoke of passion had now lifted, he saw what he had only vaguely seen before:

that she was thin and haggard; that her pale face took on a hectic flush in the glow of the blazing pine; that her clothes were all in tatters, her riding-skirt slit in many places, her coat and flannel waist so worn and torn that they barely covered her, and did indeed reveal one white shoulder through a gaping rent; that one dilapidated boot was quite out at toe; and that she was ill and faint and silent.

"Marion!" he called to her.

"Yes, Philip!" she answered, turning to look at him.

"Come here, please!"

She came and stood before him, unsteadily.

"Let me see your hands!"

She knelt, and held them out to him. Taking them in his own hands, which were then far softer and whiter than hers, he looked long at the raw and bleeding cracks, at the swollen joints, at the bruised and calloused fingers, at the nails (they were once so pink and polished) worn down to the quick, and at one nail that had been split back almost to its root.

"They're not very pretty, are they?" she said, with a weak little laugh that ended in a quiver of her chin.

He lifted the hands, the right one and then the left, and touched them with his lips. She was very weary and faint and miserable; and he had never done anything like that before; and so she drew back her hands, and buried her face in them, and sank sobbing on the floor.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE VOICE IN THE HURRICANE

THEIR sufferings, as the days went crawling into weeks, attained a certain dead level of wretchedness. At that level, should nothing worse befall, they felt that they might exist through the eight months of their imprisonment; beyond that level lay deliverance by death. So they kept a painstaking account of time, and made a sort of solemn ceremony of that hour when, as night let down its black curtain before the entrance of the cavern, Marion cut another notch in the wall, and they clasped hands in a brave effort at good cheer, and said to each other, "One more! One more!"

The cold had steadily increased until it was just barely endurable. By day it was possible to combat it in some measure, but at night they were stung and tortured by the frost that invaded the cave, and defied their meager clothing. If they tried lying closely side by side with their blankets spread over them, the cold crept under the coverings, and bit through their garments into their emaciated limbs. If they wrapped themselves tightly in the blankets, one pair to each, and lay near the fire, they were able to catch only a few fitful moments of sleep before the frost on one side and the heat on the other forced them to move.

At inexorable intervals the fire must be replenished. Heavy with sleep that was not sleep, feeble from lack

of nourishment, and stiff from cold, Marion would rise and stumble to the nearest heap of wood, and carefully lay two or three pieces on the dying embers. The fire itself was to Marion a source of continual dread; for not only did it consume their precious and unrenewable supply of wood with a terrifying voracity, but she was fairly obsessed by the fear that she might let it go out. In that event they might never waken, clutched by the cold in their sleep; or wakening, find that something had happened to the matches. There remained a good store of these in the box enfolded carefully in a bit of cloth and a strip of deerskin, and bestowed in a high niche of the cavern; but there was sometimes moisture in the night winds, and there could be no absolute assurance that the matches would ignite in an emergency.

The winds blew irregularly, sometimes roaring through the cave, and filling it with a whirl of smoke and snow, and sometimes creeping along the floor with the malevolence and stealthiness of a serpent. Marion had blocked up the entrance with small logs and limbs, but the winds and draughts made scorn of this loose barrier. Her clothes were fast falling from her body. She essayed crude patchwork with strips of deerskin and pins of wood, but these efforts were rendered futile by wear and tear and the rotting of the cloth itself. She began to be embarrassed when her flesh showed through the rents in her garments; but Haig, with a mingling of frankness and tact that might indeed have been less easy in other circumstances, effectually helped her to banish all false modesty from a situation in which they were reduced to primitive habits and almost to primitive familiarities.

She was less able to accustom herself to the dirt, from which there was no escape, but which irked her nevertheless more than all else. She was no longer able to keep clean in any sense of cleanliness associated with civilization. Washing with water melted from snow, without soap or towels, had only the effect, as it seemed to her, to fix the grime more deeply in her skin. And the hair that had been her pride had now no more the golden lights in its tawny masses, and was becoming dark and harsh and sheenless in spite of her most assiduous attention.

"Don't worry!" said Haig one day, in a grim attempt at humor. "Just imagine you are a belle of the Eskimos."

"Philip! How can you?" she cried.

"Washing," he went on, "is only another error of civilization. I have seen whole tribes of most respectable aborigines that never bathed. And they seemed to be quite happy. It saves a lot of time. But that's another queer thing. The more time we need, the more we waste it on matters that are really unimportant. Like most of our attempts to improve on nature, it costs more than it's worth, and —"

"That will do, Philip!" she protested. "I can forget I'm hungry, but — ugh! not this!"

But she spoke too bravely about her hunger. Their food by this time had begun to pall. The good venison, of which they had eaten joyously at first, became tasteless and then disgusting. They had no salt. The bacon and the bread had long since been consumed, and the chocolate also. There was left nothing but the flesh of deer and rabbits. Marion stewed it, broiled it,

baked it under hot ashes; and they even nibbled at it raw; but the time came when only the relentless pangs of hunger, the hunger of the animal, the sheer clamor of their stomachs could force them to eat the nauseating food. In consequence of this revulsion, they were always hungry; and sometimes, in spite of their resolution, they descended to torturing each other with talk of the good things there were in the world to eat.

"Claire makes the most gorgeous apple dumplings!" said Marion on one of these occasions.

"Apple dumplings? Ye-es," replied Haig judiciously. "But what about plain dumplings in chicken gravy?"

"Fricassee!" cried Marion.

"No. Maryland."

"Still, Philip, if I had my choice it wouldn't be chicken at all."

"What then?"

"Potatoes. Big, baked potatoes, split open, you know, with butter and salt and paprika."

"Or sweet potatoes swimming in butter."

"And salad — lettuce and tomatoes and oil and vinegar."

"And then pie. Think of blackberry pie!"

"And jam. I do love jam spread on toast."

"I'll tell you something," said Haig recklessly. "I could even eat sauerkraut!"

Their worst craving was for salt. Marion could fairly taste the spray of the Atlantic on the bathing beaches. She dreamt of salt,— barrels of salt and oceans of salt and caves she had read of in which salt hung in glittering stalactites. And Haig too. He

described a desert where salt had risen to the surface and gleamed in crystals in the sand. And once he had lived a long time on salt pork, which he had thought the most insufferable food. But now! The taste of it came back to him, and went tingling through every nerve.

To free their minds from such tormenting memories, Haig went deep into his adventures, his wanderings, his search for excitements. He told her of strange lands and peoples, of the beautiful spots of the world, of battles and perils and escapes,— everything he had been through, with one exception. That — the story of Paris — was still a closed book to her. And similarly, there was one chapter of her life that she did not open to him. A certain delicacy, rendered more vital by their very situation, in which few delicacies could be maintained, restrained them from the uttermost self-revelation. The one subject that was not touched upon in the most intimate of their conversations was that dearest to Marion's heart and most incomprehensible to Haig's reason. Partly this avoidance was intuitive, and partly deliberate; where there was so much suffering that could not be escaped, they were scrupulous to inflict upon each other no unnecessary pain or embarrassment. Between a more common man and a less fastidious woman, placed in such propinquity, there would almost inevitably have been concessions and compromises; but between these two there remained a barrier that might have been passed by Marion's unquestioning love, but never by Haig's inclinations, curbed as they had been through many years, and still reined in by his distrust.

The day came when it seemed safe for Haig to stand and to move a little about the cave. He had fashioned slowly a pair of rude crutches, if they could be so called,— two pine limbs trimmed down with his pocket-knife, with their natural forks left to fit under his arms. Marion protested that he was attempting this feat much too soon, but she was compelled to watch him in an agony of suspense lest he should fall on the hard floor of the cave, or rest his weight on the injured leg, and so undo all that had cost them so much of care and labor. But caution restrained him; for he was aware of the danger, though he was also half-mad with impatience to be a man once more. Venturing only a few tentative steps at first, he steadily accustomed himself to movement with the aid of the awkward crutches, and in a few days was able to take up some of the work of their wretched habitation. Marion saw that this pleased him immensely, almost as if he had been a boy entrusted with a man's responsibility; and once, too, she saw him stand a long time before the row of notches on the wall, and thought his figure straightened, and a flush came into his pale cheek.

And then, in the sixth week of their imprisonment, Marion fell ill. She had caught a cold, which was not the first by any means, but much more severe than its predecessors. With watery eyes and red noses and distressing coughs they had become familiar, but this was plainly a more serious matter. For three days more she dragged herself about, trying to conceal her state from him and from herself, but crying softly when he did not see her.

One morning, as the dawn crept into the cavern, she

tried as usual to rise from her hard bed, and fell back with a stifled moan. Haig heard her, and raised his head quickly, struck by an unaccustomed note in her low cry.

"What is it, Marion?" he asked in alarm.

"It's no use, dear!" she whispered. "I can't get up."

For a moment he lay stricken, incapable of thought. Not that the event was unexpected. He had been reckoning on that; he had seen her steadily failing, and knew that she could not go on indefinitely under such privations. And yet, when it came, it was appalling. The grayness of the cave settled down upon him like a pall. Once he would have been indifferent to it, resigned to the knowledge that it was inevitable. But now he had come, if not to share her hope, at least to sympathize with it, and to wish ardently for her sake that her faith might be justified. And it seemed a pitiable thing that she should have been deceived, an intolerable thing that she should die there so uselessly, — for him.

He moved over to her, and placed his hand on her forehead. It was burning hot.

"Water, please!" she gasped.

He hobbled to the entrance, and brought a cupful of snow, and melted it over the fire. She drank the water greedily, and begged for more. But he told her gently that she must wait a little while. Then he sat thinking. What should be done with fever? It would probably be pneumonia, or something as fatal. And it would take her as the north wind takes the drooping petals of a rose.

He bent over her, and tried to soothe her with such futile words as came. The look she gave him went straight into deep, dark cells of his being that he thought had been closed and sealed forever. She begged him to eat; he must cook his own breakfast. Oh, but he must eat, or he should not be able to help her, she said. She would be quite well in a day or two; she was sure of that; and he must not get sick too. After he had been so patient and so good to her!

Haig turned away with a groan, and tried to obey her. But eat? Eat that repulsive food that he had choked down these many days only to please her, only to subscribe to her foolish faith? He could not! But presently she raised her head, and saw that he was not eating, and chided him. Whereupon he swallowed some morsels of the venison, and assured her that he had eaten heartily.

All that day she lay there, her face flushed, her eyes gleaming with a brightness that was more than the brightness of her indomitable spirit. When she smiled up at him he turned his face away that she might not see what he knew was written on it. And then he realized how much that smile had come to mean to him — how all unawares he had come to covet and to prize it — how he had half-consciously of late resorted to unexpected words and gestures to coax it to her lips.

There was no sleep for either of them that night. The next day Marion grew steadily worse, and toward evening she became delirious. And there was no concealment in this delirium as there had been in his. All that he had not seen and heard and guessed before was now wholly revealed to him. He was permitted to

see deep into the pure soul of the girl, into her very heart that was brimming over with love for him. His name came riding on every breath. It was Philip, Philip, Philip! And bit by bit, and fragment by fragment, he heard all the pitiful story of her love, of her petty stratagems, of the wicked little plot she had made, of the traps from which he had extricated himself, of the pretended sprain in her ankle, of her watching and waiting, of the anguish he had caused her, of her solitary communion with the stars on Mount Avalanche, of her dismissal of Hillyer, of her faith in the love that should not be denied and unrequited, of her prayers for a miracle that should bring him to her at last.

He looked down at the poor, small foot in its ragged shoe; yes, that was the foot that was "sprained." And how it had trudged, and dragged itself along for him, when every bone and muscle of her body ached! He looked at her hands, thin even in their swollenness, raw and bleeding, hard as a laborer's on the palms. How they had toiled and bled for him! For him! And what about him? What about Philip Haig?

He leaned back from her, and closed his eyes. And suddenly it seemed as if something fell away from them, as if something that had bound and imprisoned and blinded him had been rudely shattered. In one terrible, torturing revelation he saw clearly what he had been, what he had done, what a miserable wreck he had made of life, what a pitiable, dwarfed, misshapen thing his soul had become in comparison with the soul of this girl whom he had despised. He saw that he had lived a life of almost untouched egoism, setting his own wrongs above all the other wrongs in the world,

counting his own griefs the greatest of all griefs, nursing his own tragedy as if it had been the first tragedy and the last. Bitterly, remorselessly he reviewed his selfishness, his hatred, his senseless rage, the heartlessness wrought by himself in a nature that had been, in the beginning, as pure, if not as precious and fine and beautiful, as hers.

And that was not all. He had taken woman for the special object of his hatred. He had made himself believe that all women were alike. Was there, then, only one kind of woman in a world filled with many kinds of men? Because he had been a fool, because he had been deceived by one woman, he had concluded, in his folly, that every woman was a vampire or a parasite,—"a rag and a bone and a hank of hair"!

And now there lay before him indeed (and the words took on a new and more terrible meaning) "a rag and a bone and a hank of hair." Yes, this was all that was left of her. This was what he had made of the most joyous and most beautiful creature that had ever crossed his path; this was the best he could do for one who had had the misfortune to love him and the courage to tell him so. This was his work! His memory went back to that day before the post-office. How beautiful she was then, how strangely beautiful, coming out of that halo of light by the side of the golden outlaw. Something had stirred within him then, as it had stirred again and again: at Huntington's when she reached for his revolver; in his cottage that last afternoon of her nursing. And he had repulsed it, put it down, and trampled on it, as if it had been an execrable thing instead of the very treasure he had been

seeking all his life without knowing what he sought. And now he recognized it for what it was — too late!

He bent nearer to her, listening.

"Philip! Philip!" she was saying, in tender, coaxing accents, with that quivering of her chin that had many times been almost irresistible.

Then came the final break-up of everything within him. He felt lifted as upon a flood, and a wild and passionate longing surged through all his being. He leaned swiftly over her, and clasped her in his arms, and pressed her hot cheek against his own. And then — it was unendurable; he felt one of her arms softly encircling his neck. There was just one gentle pressure, and then the arm fell to her side, and her head sank weakly away from him. He laid her back tenderly on her hard bed.

He sat up again, looking at her and listening. She rambled on in half-coherent speech. She had not heard him cry out her name; or if she had heard him it had been only a part of her fevered dreams. And this was the crowning bitterness: that he should want to speak to her, to tell her that he loved her, and she could not hear; that he was too late, and she would never know.

He leaped to his feet in a whirling tempest of rage. He stumbled to the mouth of the cave, and thrust himself half through the barricade, and looked out into the wilderness of snow, and stood shaking his fist at it, quivering with passion, and uttering the wildest imprecations upon the world, upon the outlaw, and upon himself. And gradually they centered upon himself alone; and he stood presently, as it were, naked before

God, with something like a prayer unspoken, a silent, voiceless petition rising from his tortured soul.

He became calm after that. A curious peace, it seemed, had flowed in upon him. Mechanically he renewed the fire, brought water and held it to Marion's lips, and eased her position on the bed. Then he sat by her side to wait!

Well, this was the end. She would be going soon, — to-morrow, or the day after. He glanced toward the shelf where Marion's rifle and his revolver lay. She would not be there now to snatch the weapon from his hand! But she would be waiting for him. And there came back to him the strange feeling he had experienced in his cottage — the pressure of her hand still warm on his own — her hand helping up and up . . . out of the Valley of the Shadow. And her hand would be stretched out for him — in the Beyond —

It must have been about the middle of the next forenoon — he had ceased to reckon time, and there were no more notches cut on the black wall of the cave — when Philip, sitting at Marion's side, observed a curious, restless movement of her head. She had lain all morning in a stupor, very still, with only an occasional murmur from her dry lips. But now, moving her head from side to side, she tried to lift it, as if to listen.

"What is it, Marion?" asked Haig, leaning close to her.

"Listen!" she whispered.

He obeyed her, or pretended to, and turned an ear toward the mouth of the cavern. The wind was up

with its wailing and its snarls and shrieks. He heard it for a moment, then looked at her in

"My poor girl! My poor Marion!" he said.

"Listen!" she repeated, with a touching emphasis, almost childish, almost petulant.

He heard the storm.

"Yes, Marion," he said, humoring her.

"Can't you hear it?" she pleaded. "Listen!"

It was the delirium again; she was hearing things that were not, except in her disordered mind. Perhaps — he had read somewhere that the dying, those of them that are pure at heart, sometimes hear the calling of the —

"Somebody's — coming!" she cried in the thinnest, most childlike treble. Her face shone; she tried to sit up; she raised one hand feebly toward him.

"Please lie down, dear!" pleaded Haig, pressing her gently back.

She resisted him, smiling and frowning at the same time.

"Be — very — still. And — listen!" she persisted.

To please her, he sat erect, and listened. They were very still then, one of her hands between both of his. And the storm was raging. It was wilder, wilder. All the fury of Thunder Mountain seemed to be behind the wind that came shrieking and bellowing down the gulch.

The seconds passed, with dead silence in the cave, and that bedlam let loose outside.

Then suddenly Haig lifted his head. What was it? There seemed to have come — No, it was but a mocking voice of the hurricane, one of the myriad voices of that wintry inferno, mocking them with a half-human

cry. He looked sadly down at Marion, and saw that wondrous smile again upon her emaciated face. Oh, but this was maddening! Yet because she wished it, he listened again. And then, out of that tumult — very faint and far —

"My God! My God!" he shouted.

He leaped to his feet. He forgot his crutches. He flung himself across the floor of the cave in three reckless bounds, flung himself on the barrier of logs and limbs, clawing it like a maniac, or a wild beast, tore his way through it, and stood in the snow on the platform, calling into the storm, shrieking, bellowing, out-shrieking and out-bellowing the storm, swaying dizzily in the wind, and clutching at the air before him in a frenzy.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE MAN WHO DID NOT FORGET

OUT of the tempest came the answering halloo; and Haig redoubled his outcries. Twice it came, whipped and broken by the wind; and then there was but the wind itself. Exhausted by his efforts, and sick of desperation and despair, Haig sank back weakly against the rock. Round and round him whirled the snow; across his face the wind cut him with savage lashes; in his ears there was nothing, nothing but the storm. Then all grew black before him. After all, it had been an hallucination; he had been as mad as Marion in her delirium; he had peopled the storm with imaginary beings, had given the wind a voice it did not know. Crushed by disappointment, acknowledging the end, he was sinking down upon the snow-covered platform, when suddenly —

"Hal-lo-o-o!"

It was nearer and louder than before. Haig straightened up, and again filled the tumultuous air with hoarse cries. Once more the voice came; and then out of the white chaos at the right of the cave, almost level with the platform, a dark form appeared, striding forward with a peculiar swinging motion, clumsily but sure.

Haig uttered one more call that dribbled into a sobbing cry.

"All — right!" answered the figure, in a smothered tone.

Huge, hunchbacked and cumbersome, the figure shuffled up the slight slope between the level of the snow and the snowy platform, and halted. A mittened hand went up to its head, and brushed the snow from the face.

"Pete!" cried Haig.

He attempted to move forward, stumbled, lunged toward the Indian, and collapsed in his arms. Pete, holding him, looked around until he saw the opening of the cave, and fairly carried Haig inside. For a few seconds, seeing nothing in the sudden change from the dazzling whiteness of the snow to the dim red light of the cavern, Pete stood still. Then Haig stiffened, stood erect, and pushed the Indian from him.

"There! Look!" he gasped, pointing to where Marion lay, wild-eyed on the bed, wrapped in her blankets. Then he sank down on the floor, with his back against the wall, and gave himself up to dizziness and exhaustion.

Pete quickly removed his thick mittens, unstrapped the bundle that rested on his back, and took off the snowshoes that had caused his approach over the snow to appear so like a lumbering animal's. Flinging all these on the floor, he went swiftly to Marion's side, and knelt there.

"Sick?" he asked.

She did not answer, but stared at him, and smiled.

"Listen!" she whispered. "Somebody — coming!"

Pete stood up, and looked at Haig.

"How long like this?" he asked.

"I forget. Three or four days."

"You well?"

"Yes," Haig answered weakly.

Pete came closer, and pointed to the leg that Haig kept thrust stiffly out before him.

"Broke?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Six weeks."

The Indian asked no more questions just then, but hastened to open his pack. First he found a bottle of whisky, and made Haig take a long drink. Pete believed in two remedies for all human ills. He had a brew of herbs that he had inherited from his tribal ancestors, his sole inheritance besides his iron body. This brew was good for fevers; and whisky was good for everything else. Having doctored Haig with the whisky, he now turned to Marion with the brew. From a flask he poured some of the dark brown liquid into a cup, let it come just to a boil among the embers of the fire, and when it had cooled a little placed it to Marion's lips. It was bitter, and she tried to draw away from it, but Pete forced her gently to drain the cup.

Whatever the brew might be worth, the whisky certainly was efficacious. Haig sat erect, and began hurling questions at the Indian.

"How did you get in here — in God's name?" was the first.

"Black Lake country."

"But how did you get in there?"

"Simpson's Pass."

Haig stared at him. He knew that to reach Simpson's Pass the Indian must have gone far south below the canyon of the Big Bear, made a wide detour over the lower range, and ascended to the Pass around the shoulder of Big Bear Mountain. He had never heard of the Pass being crossed in winter, and it was almost unbelievable.

"But the snow!" he exclaimed.

Pete pointed to the snowshoes.

"But the Pass doesn't let into the Black Lake country," said Haig. "There's another range of mountains."

"Yes. I come over them."

"How long did it take you?"

"I been four weeks. But most of time looking in forest down there."

"But how did you find us?"

The Indian drew from his pocket a ragged and soiled piece of paper, and spread it out on the floor. It was a crude map, with Paradise Park outlined at one side, and at the other a labyrinth of lines and stars and crosses. The stars were peaks, the crosses were foothills, and the lines were creeks and valleys. Through the maze ran one heavier line that indicated the trail through the Black Lake country up to the cliff at the back of Thunder Mountain.

"Old Parker made it," said Pete.

"Tell me all!" commanded Haig. "But wait!" He pointed to Marion.

Marion's babbling had slowly subsided, and ceased. Pete rose and went to her noiselessly on his moccasined

feet; and after looking at her a moment stepped cautiously back.

"She quiet now. Sleep soon," he said.

And it was so. The next time he slipped over to her, the girl's eyes were closed, and soon she had sunk into a profound slumber from which she did not awake until late the next morning.

Meanwhile Pete took up his story. Smythe had delivered Marion's message, and had told them what he feared. Claire's knowledge of the state of Marion's heart and mind enabled her to guess the worst, but Seth scouted the idea of her trying to reach the top of Thunder Mountain, or of Murray permitting her to try it. So two days were lost before the alarm was sounded by Murray, who, after two attempts to reach the top of the mountain, had given up and ridden to the Park for help.

The whole valley responded to the call, and the most desperate efforts were made to reach the plateau, but the storms that Haig and Marion had heard in their sheltered gulch were of such fury and continuity that the hardiest of the ranchmen were unable to prevail against them. Huntington, half-crazed by the thought of the two days he had allowed to be lost, had gone farther than any of the others, and had been rescued with difficulty by some of his neighbors, who found him lying senseless at the foot of the ascent to the Devil's Chair, where the wind had hurled him back down the slope. Smythe was among those who saved him, for the little tutor had let the last stage go without him, and was one of the most reckless in the attacks on the mountain.

All these efforts having failed, and the winter having fallen with exceptional suddenness and severity, even Huntington was forced to accept the general opinion that nothing more could be done; that they could only wait for summer, when they could go to the mountain top and bring back Marion's body — and doubtless Haig's too. And so, said Huntington, the feud was ended.

One person alone in the Park refused to admit all this. Pete was forced indeed to admit it in theory, but he was resolved to prove it or disprove it on his own account. He had studied Thunder Mountain from the ridge above the ranch house all that day of Sunnysides' escape, and the next. And he remembered now that a period of calm had followed the storm on that second day. If Haig or Marion, or both of them, had by chance reached the flat top in that interval, they might have crossed, and might be now somewhere in the forests on the other side.

He went to Parker, talked with him long about the character of the Black Lake country, induced him to draw the crude map, and then visited Seth and Claire. Seth shook his head gloomily, but Claire eagerly proceeded to assemble enough supplies to have loaded down a pack horse. There followed a pitifully comical struggle with her before her "first aid" was reduced to what Pete could carry in his canvas knapsack,— a small roll of underwear, needles and thread, bandages and a packet of household medicines in addition to Pete's own selection of a strip of bacon, a dozen onions, two score of vegetable soup tablets, two cans of condensed milk, small quantities of coffee and tea, salt and pepper, two cakes of

soap and (especially insisted on by Pete) a plug of black tobacco and a pipe.

All these supplies Pete had saved untouched, living himself on game shot on the long journey. For nearly five weeks he had struggled against unbelievable hardships, fighting like primitive man against the fiercest enmity of nature; had searched the whole Black Lake country; and that day, slowly following the direction of the trail up through the narrowing gulch among the tree tops, the smell of smoke was brought to his nostrils on the wind, and he traced it along the foot of the cliff.

"But did you really expect to find us alive?" asked Haig.

"No."

"Then why did you do all this?"

"All I could do. Indian never forgets."

Thereupon he brought out Haig's pipe and his own, and they smoked over it in silence, late into the night.

Marion awoke the next morning with another look in her eyes. Her fever was still high, but she was no longer delirious. Too feeble to ask questions, she only smiled, and took obediently the remainder of the potion that Pete poured from his flask and heated in the tin-cup among the embers. On her wakening again it was seen that the fever was broken. But life in her was only a tiny flame, at times the merest spark that every gust of wind through the cavern threatened to extinguish. Hour after hour Haig and the Indian watched it, the one in such anguish as the repentant murderer suffers as he kneels over the poor victim of his rage, the other in stolid resignation, seeing that perhaps he had come too late.

But the spark was the bravest little spark in the world; and it did not go out. In time Pete dared to give Marion a little weakened milk; and then, when she responded to the milk, a few sips of soup that was scarcely thicker than water. And thus from day to day they nursed her back to some recognizable shadow of what she had been two months before.

There came an evening when they sat down to a veritable feast. Haig had stubbornly refused to taste any of the delicacies in Pete's store, excepting salt and pepper. Besides, with seasoning, the venison was no longer quite repugnant to his palate; and he and the Indian did very well on that until the feast was spread. And it was a feast remembered. There was soup, to begin with, drunk from the two cups they now possessed; then a rabbit stew, seasoned with SALT AND PEPPER, and flavored with an ONION; and black coffee (very black indeed, to be quite exact). Then Haig's and Pete's pipes were lighted; and the Indian must tell them again the story of the rescue; and let the wind howl its savagest!

"Poor Claire!" said Marion, with a tremulous little laugh, when Pete told her how the knapsack was packed.

And Haig looked across at her dizzily, as if the fumes of the strong tobacco had gone to his head.

Their situation was still miserable enough, but the Indian contrived to make it less unendurable. He knew some knacks of cookery that availed to make their venison and rabbit palatable; and the tea and coffee cheered them beyond all possibility of expression. No longer required to toil; with clean underwear; with

soap for her blackened face and hands, Marion recovered her strength, or much of it, with amazing swiftness. Pete made a rough coat and even a skirt for her of deerskin. The coat was of double thickness, and very warm indeed, and so she gave back to Haig the remnant of the leather coat she had been wearing, which was now needed to cover his ragged corduroy. Then came moccasins, and better crutches for Haig; and so they settled down with new courage for what they thought would be a long wait through the implacable winter.

Haig kept his secret, or supposed he was keeping it. Marion did not indeed remember how he had taken her in his arms in her delirium; rather, if there was a faint but insistent recollection of the embrace it was intangible and unreal. She had dreamed so often of that longed-for embrace that the reality was inseparable from the imagined. Nor was she aware of the revelation that had come to Haig, as if a dazzling light had broken through the walls of the cavern. But though he might keep his secret he could not conceal from her the change that had come over him, the tenderness and wonder and humility that had succeeded his hardness and scepticism and belligerency. She detected that alteration in every look he gave her, in every movement he made in waiting upon her, in every tone of his speech, though the words were the most commonplace. And in her great faith she was not surprised. But she was thrilled. The knowledge ran through her veins like a living fire, a better nourishment than food, a more potent cure than any medicine.

So the long days, not quite so long as they used to be,

marched on. Despite the skilful services of Pete they were still always cold, always hungry, always weary for want of sleep, and always dirty and unkempt. Then there came a day when Pete astonished them. He brought in from the forest certain small limbs of tough wood, and began to trim them and bend them into shapes that they were presently able to recognize. Snowshoes!

"You don't mean — Can we do it?" cried Haig incredulously.

"Can't stay here," was Pete's short reply.

True; they could not stay there; it was just what Haig had been thinking, or trying to avoid thinking. But how would Marion be able to endure that terrible journey over Simpson's Pass? For her part she said nothing, but her eyes met Philip's; she reached her hand to him, and he clasped it tightly.

Three weeks after Pete's arrival he began gradually to inure Haig and Marion to living and moving in the snow. He taught them to walk on snowshoes, to climb steep slopes on them, to pick their way among the trees. There were countless falls in deep drifts, and headlong plunges, and ungraceful wallowings in the snow. But they knew their lives depended on these labors, and they were even able to laugh at some of their awkward performances. These exercises were, moreover, very good for them. Ill-nourished though they were, the natural color crept back into their cheeks, the blood flowed briskly again through their chilled veins, their muscles were strengthened by their struggles with the winds and the snow that still came on with unremitted vigor. Then Pete went a step farther in the preparations for the crucial test. Not only must they spend the greater

part of the day outside the cave, but they must sleep, or try to sleep, a few hours every night in the snow, wrapped in their blankets, in holes scooped out under the lee of a snowbank, while the Indian stood guard nearby.

It was near the end of December when Pete thought his charges had become sufficiently hardened to undertake the long journey. The weather, if it had not moderated (it would not begin to moderate there until long after spring had brought out the flowers in the distant Park), had settled a little after its first fury. The storms came with less frequency, and the snow had assumed a certain stability with the steadily added weight. Both Marion and Haig had mastered their snowshoes, and were able to travel slowly after Pete. Moreover, all the delicacies that Pete had brought had been consumed, despite their most careful husbanding, and even the meager supply of salt and pepper would soon be exhausted, leaving only the unseasoned venison of odious memory.

The night before the day set for their departure, Pete broiled strips of venison sufficient for a week or more, and stowed them in his knapsack. At dawn they were up, and eagerly making the final preparations. Haig and Marion, in their impatience, would have eaten nothing, but the Indian, true to his tribal habit of filling the stomach before a march, insisted that breakfast should be a methodical and leisurely business. From some recess he drew the last soup tablet, the last onion, and the last of the ground coffee, which he had clandestinely saved against this great event. The feast with which they had celebrated Marion's recovery was

now repeated in celebration of their farewell to the cave, — the soup, the rabbit stew and the black coffee.

Then, when Pete had fastened their snowshoes securely on their moccasined feet, and had gone out to trample down the fresh snow on the platform before the cave, Haig and Marion stood together for a last look upon the scene of their sufferings. They looked at the dying fire, at the flattened beds of boughs, at the long row of notches on the wall, at the crutches lying among the firewood, at crumpled and ragged boots and bits of worn-out clothing.

"Good-by — you!" cried Marion, laughing tremulously, very near to tears.

"Yes, good-by!" said Haig.

That cave — what had it not meant for him! There was his Valley of the Shadow, into which he had again descended to seek and find the better part of him that he had left here long ago.

"Go on out, please!" he said presently. "I'll come in a minute."

She looked at him curiously, but obeyed. Haig waited till she had gone, and then shuffled clumsily on his snowshoes across the floor to where, beyond the fire, lay one of Marion's boots. It was a torn and misshapen thing, the sole worn through, the leather curled up from the open toe. He picked it up hastily, and with a swift glance at the mouth of the cavern, thrust it into an inside pocket of his leather coat.

It was a wonderful, thrilling, terrifying journey, filled with hardships and perils. Caution and sheer toil of travel held them to slow progress. They went

through vast forests, among the very tops of the tall pines; they climbed wide, bare slopes where the winds had almost stripped the snow from the gaunt rocks; they descended into sheltered valleys where the deer went scurrying at their approach; they crossed deep gulches packed half-full of blown and drifted snow; they passed close to the edges of precipices where a false step would have sent them whirling down into white abysses spiked with pines. Storms overtook them, and forced them to remain many hours in such shelter as they could find. Sometimes they slept under overhanging rocks with a fire blazing at their feet, but more often the night was spent in burrows dug in the snow. Their supply of venison ran out, and a day was lost while Pete hunted and killed a deer, and cooked strips of its flesh, to be seasoned with the very last of their salt and pepper, and kept in his knapsack. But even Marion did not lose courage or once falter, though many times her heart was in her mouth and a cold sweat on her forehead as they passed some formidable and terrifying obstacle.

At length, on a bright and glittering day, when it seemed the storms had finally abandoned their enmity, they climbed slowly up the long slopes to Simpson's Pass, and stood at noon high above a wide and wonderful world of snow, with white mountains succeeding one another, range on range, as far as their eyes could reach before them and behind. And that afternoon, as they toiled around the shoulder of Big Bear Mountain, they stopped and gazed,— Marion with tears streaming down her cheeks, and Haig with his hands clenched tightly at his sides. For there, still far away below them, but

there beyond all mistake, lay Paradise Park, very white and still and glittering in the sun; and off at the right was Thunder Mountain, squatting among the silver peaks, its sullen head half hidden by gray-black clouds.

CHAPTER XXIX

GHOSTS

THE lamp had not been lighted in the sitting-room at Huntington's, but the pitch log blazing in the great fireplace reddened the farthest corners of the room, and flushed the somber faces of Seth and Claire. Their habit, in these days of grief, was to sit the winter evenings through almost in silence, their self-reproaches long since spent, their hopes turned to ashes, which Claire alone tried sometimes to fan into a glow. They had eaten their supper before twilight, without speech, and then, as always, waited wearily for sleep.

"It will be three months and two weeks to-morrow," she said, without looking away from the fire.

"Yes," answered Hungtington.

"Isn't it possible she may have reached —"

"It's no use, Claire, thinking such things."

"But Pete! He hasn't come back, and maybe that means —"

She did not even finish the sentence, which simply faded away on her lips, a useless and foolish conjecture.

Another long silence followed. Seth's cigarette went out, and hung dead from his bearded lips, while he stared gloomily into the blaze. He sat with his back toward the front door. Claire, near a corner of the big stone chimney, leaned forward, her head inclined to one side, the cheek resting on her open hand, the elbow on

her knee. Her eyes, which had been lifted from their long gazing at the fire at the moment she addressed her husband, were fixed on vacancy, looking past Huntington toward the door that led out upon the veranda, where the rising wind tossed little whirls of snow and dead leaves from the flower garden. She was torturing herself with a conjured vision of a wild, high place among snow-bound rocks, in the midst of which a slender figure was slowly sinking down, and a white and stricken face was turned toward her. This was the vision that had become for her the settled picture of Marion's fate, a picture that was burned into her brain by many, many hours of imagining, day and night.

The wind was howling around the ranch house, wailing among the gables, shrieking across the chimney top. It rattled at the door, as if to fling it open with sudden violence. And what was that? A footstep on the veranda? She shivered; it was only her shaken nerves again! Then came another rattle at the door. It moved. It *was* flung open. And there was the figure of her dream, but strangely and fantastically clad; and with a face that glowed, and lips that were parted in a smile.

For a moment Claire did not move. Then slowly she lifted her head; her eyes grew round and staring, her mouth opened. Seth caught the look; it was one he had seen many times before.

"Claire!" he cried. "Stop that!"

His voice, perhaps, served to break the spell. Claire leaped to her feet. And the next instant there was a voice from the doorway.

"Hello!" said Marion cheerily, in a "good evening"

kind of tone, as if she had returned from the post-office.

Huntington bounded from his chair, and whirled around with an oath,—one oath surely that was forgiven him. But past him, with a scream dashed Claire.

"Marion!" she shrieked.

"Marion!" bellowed Seth.

And then the two women were in each other's arms, and Seth grabbed one of Marion's hands, and the air was filled with hysterical cries and mighty, spluttered expletives. Then silence fell, while Claire and Marion wept without restraint, and Huntington searched for his handkerchief without finding it, and strode across the room and back, pounding one clenched hand into the palm of the other. But Marion presently tore herself out of Claire's embrace, and turned to grab an arm of Pete, who stood just outside the doorway, through which the wind unheeded was flinging snow and leaves into the room.

"Here he is!" cried Marion. "He did it!"

Claire promptly threw her arms around the Indian's neck, or as nearly around as she could reach, and stood on tiptoe to plant a kiss on his leathery cheek. Huntington too leaped on him, seizing his shoulder and hand, and dragging him farther into the room. Then he broke away, and ran for a bottle; and the two men clicked glasses and drank in silence. And two big chairs were drawn close to the fire for Pete and Marion; and while Claire sat crying softly, and Huntington, between "damns" and "hells," wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, and Pete sat impressive, Marion quickly narrated the chief incidents of her pursuit of Haig, their long imprisonment, and the rescue.

"But Haig! Where's he?" asked Huntington.

"He left us at the junction," answered Marion.

On that a moment of silence fell. Something in Marion's face told even Huntington to keep still. But Claire, seeing it, was secretly, wickedly, triumphantly glad. A very practical thought, however, came to her in time to prevent embarrassment, and Seth was sent bustling into the kitchen to relight the fire in the range. The cook had gone to bed, but Claire would get supper for them; for Pete must stay, she insisted. But at this the Indian rose, and said he must go to Haig, who had told him to hurry back for supper with him in the cottage.

"Well, then, Pete," said Huntington from the door of the kitchen, "you'll have another drink, anyhow. And you'll come up to-morrow to tell us how you found them, won't you?"

Pete promised; the whisky was solemnly drunk again; and the three others followed him to the door.

"But you must have a horse!" said Huntington.

So he jumped past him, and ran to the stable, bellowing for Williams.

"Now take off your coat, Marion!" cried Claire.

"No. Not here," said Marion. "You'll see why."

They waited before the blazing log for Huntington to return, whereupon he was sent to build a fire in Marion's room. When it was crackling finely, Marion removed her deerskin coat and skirt. Claire stared at her, gasping; and then sank down on the bed in another fit of weeping. For Marion stood before her in rags and dirt.

"Oh, but you should have seen me the day Pete came!" cried Marion, with a pathetic little laugh. "I've actually got some flesh on my bones now."

Indescribable luxuries followed: a hot bath, wonderful clean garments, and Claire's happy fingers combing the tangles out of the tawny hair.

"But I'll never be really and truly clean again, Claire!" cried Marion ruefully, holding out her hands.

Claire clasped them tenderly, while Marion, on a sudden thought, related to her Haig's speech about baths; and they laughed together.

"You've so many things to tell me," said Claire, with a curiosity she could not quite repress.

"Yes," answered Marion, blushing.

It was nearly midnight when they sat down to supper, but none of them cared for time. Marion was not sleepy. She and Haig and Pete had slept well in a deserted cabin the last night of their journey, before a huge fire, in circumstances positively pleasant in comparison with what they had passed through. But she was hungry. As she never expected to be really and truly clean again, she doubted that she should ever get enough to eat. Claire did the best she could on that score, and that was something. There was chicken with cream gravy; and potatoes, baked in their skins, and seasoned with butter and salt and paprika; and three kinds of jelly to be spread on buttered toast; and angel cake. In the midst of the feast there were steps on the veranda, and a knock on the door; and Curly appeared, bearing two bottles of champagne.

"Mr. Haig says you're all to drink Pete's health, an' he ought to live to be a hundred," said Curly, grinning,

and gazing in wonderment at Marion, whose exploit had caused her to assume somewhat the nature of a goddess in his simple mind.

When the door had closed on Curly, Huntington stood for a moment awkwardly holding the bottles, an expression almost of consternation on his face. He had once made some remarks about Haig's champagne. But he had the sense not to act the part of a skeleton at the feast. Pete's health was drunk by all; and might he live to be a hundred!

In another hour Marion was in bed, in a real bed, in her own pink room, between sweet, clean sheets, and warm again at last, but shivering in sheer excess of comfort, and crying a little perhaps from overwhelming joy. For she knew in her heart — something she could not yet tell even Claire.

Bill Craven was mending a bridle by the light of a smoky lantern in the stable, when he saw a ghost. It just opened the door, and walked in, and said, "How are you, Bill?" Craven fell backward off his stool, then leaped to his feet with a yell that caused a commotion among the barn swallows under the eaves, and brought Farrish and Curly tumbling down the ladder from the loft. Thereupon discipline, for which Haig had always been rather a stickler, suffered a bad half hour. They had given him up for lost; and had found on comparing experiences that each of them had many reasons for counting that loss his own. In the days following the attempts to rescue Miss Gaylord, these three had gone about the Park with chips on their shoulders, inviting any outspoken citizen to say to them anything that was

not strictly proper and complimentary about Haig. So now, though the words were few after the first noisy demonstration, they were the kind of words that are worth hearing, from man to man.

Haig and Bill Craven presently compared notes in the matter of "busted" legs. Bill's had mended much sooner than Haig's, which was quite easily understood, considering the great difference in their circumstances. Curly had "nigh killed" the sorrels, getting the doctor for Craven, but they were all right now. "Fat and sassy," Curly added.

"I'll take some of that out of them to-morrow," said Haig. "I'll want the sleigh, Farrish. Please look after it in the morning."

Then, seeing their impatience, he told them of Sunnysides' final escape, and of all the events that followed — as much as was good for them to know.

"But where's Pete?" asked Craven.

"He went to Huntington's with Miss Gaylord. He'll be along soon."

"Well, jest wait till we git our hands on that damned Indian!" cried Bill. "Eh, men?"

It was evident that there would be a considerable disturbance in the barn on Pete's arrival.

A few minutes later Haig had his surprise. On entering the cottage he first encountered Slim Jim in the outer room. Perhaps Jim's face turned a trifle yellower, perhaps his thin legs trembled a little under the sky-blue trousers; but that was about all, except the light that flickered an instant in his eyes.

"Glad you back!" he said simply. "Want supper?"

"Want supper! Why, you scrawny, evil-eyed heathen! Want supper! I want everything you've got to eat, and everything you haven't got, and don't you tell me there's 'vellee lil' either, or I'll break every bone in your body. And be quick about it too!"

Jim hurried into the kitchen with so much of a departure from his oriental poise that the first pan he picked up fell to the floor with a clatter. That was the most eloquent testimonial he could have given, unless it was the supper that was ready for Haig in an hour — and no "velle lil" supper at that — to his participation in the general rejoicing.

Haig, meanwhile, opened the inner door, stepped into the library-bedroom, and halted dead still on the threshold. At his entrance, a tall, thin young man, with a very pale face, rose like an automaton and stared at him. It was a question which of the two was the more amazed.

"Thursby!" cried Haig, recovering the more quickly.

"Haig!"

"Where did you come from?"

"From the other side of the world. And you?"

"From the very bowels of the earth, man!"

They walked slowly toward each other until they met, and clasped hands.

"You found him?" asked Haig, searching the other's face.

"In Singapore."

"And then?"

"He's dead."

"And she?"

"I've sent her back to her people in Devonshire."

Haig gripped hard the hand that was still clasped in his own, and there was a moment of silence.

"Well," said Haig, "we'll have a nip of whisky, and then — You've come back to take your ranch, of course."

"I *came* back for that, but I can't figure out that it's mine now."

"How's that?" asked Haig, pouring out the drinks.

"I left three hundred head of cattle, and now I learn there are thirteen hundred head, almost."

"Don't let that worry you. I've sold enough of the increase to bring back all the money they cost me. So we're quits."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Be sensible, Haig. First thing, why did you do it?"

"For the fun of it, partly."

"And after that?"

"Well, your fine ranch here wasn't making much money, and I thought you'd need a good deal, perhaps, before you got through with your — affair."

"And yet you say we're quits!"

"I'm satisfied."

"But I'm not. You'll take a half interest, and we'll go partners."

"No."

"I say yes," persisted Thursby. "But I'm forgetting to ask questions. How the devil did you get back?"

"I will a tale unfold will harrow up thy bones — and

the rest of it," replied Haig, laughing. "But first: when did you arrive?"

"By the last stage in."

"And what have you told them — my pleasant neighbors?"

"Nothing. But they have the impression that I came for the final payment on the ranch, and that I remained because you were lost in the mountains."

"Good. Now, old man, I'll tell you how you can repay me in full for anything you may think I've done for you."

"Go on!"

"Are you ready to assume the responsibility for my acts? I mean in the matter of the land and cattle? The rest is still my affair.

"Most certainly."

"Well then. I've very special reasons for needing peace with Huntington."

Thursby looked at him curiously. This from Philip Haig!

"And you want me to —"

"Don't misunderstand me. I've gone up there before, and I'm going again to-morrow. But I want to give Huntington a chance. So if you'll go to his house to-morrow morning, and tell him that I've finished, that the ranch is not mine, and —"

"But the ranch is yours — or half yours."

"Never mind about that now. We'll talk it over later. Just tell Huntington that the ranch is not mine, and never has been, and — whatever else you like. Then say to him that if he still wants to fight me I'll meet him anywhere, and we'll settle it. In any event,

you will tell him, I'm coming to his place to-morrow afternoon, and I'll have no gun."

"I see."

"And you'll do it?"

"Of course. With all my heart."

And he made a thorough job of it. He told them — Huntington, Claire and Marion — that he had been in great trouble. What that trouble was concerned nobody but himself, but it was enough to send him around the world, reckless of everything but the immediate object of his pursuit. Philip Haig, an old friend, had volunteered to look after his ranch for him, and to provide him with money when he needed it. So, if Haig had seemed too aggressive and selfish in his methods, all that he had done had been done in a spirit of — he might say a spirit that was almost quixotic. And having done all this, increasing Thursby's holdings of cattle four times, Haig refused to accept anything for his time and labor, and insisted that their account was closed.

Marion had known nothing of all this, save for the hints she had received from Smythe, following the conversation overheard by him. Philip had told her nothing of it in recounting his adventures. With glistening eyes she looked from Claire to Huntington, where they sat open-mouthed, and was thrilled with pride and triumph. Claire at length turned, and looked at her, and smiled. As for Huntington, he was simply (as he explained afterwards, seeking to justify his ready acquiescence) flabbergasted.

"This has been a very bitter business, Thursby," he said. "It's cost me a lot of cattle and money, and I'll not take back a thing I've said about Haig's grabbing

everything in sight, and ruining his neighbors. But I will say, after what you've told me, that — damn it, Thursby! he is a man."

"He's ready to fight with you or talk with you, as you wish."

Huntington eyed him suspiciously.

"Did Haig say that?" he demanded.

"He certainly did."

"Then tell him, if he's on the square, it'll be talk."

Claire, ignoring Thursby's presence, ran and snuggled close to Seth, while he put his arm around her. But it was at Marion, *to* Marion, that Seth looked, seeking the approval that he had never before been able to get from her. Their eyes met, and she nodded, smiling.

"Very well!" said Thursby. "He's coming to see you this afternoon."

"What?" cried Huntington.

"He's coming this afternoon. And he wished me to say explicitly that he will have no gun."

To Huntington this seemed almost incredible. He was heartily sick of the warfare, and glad of any way out of it that would not be too humiliating to himself. But Haig was coming to him; and this meant, surely, that something had occurred to his enemy that would make the event easy for himself, if not quite free from embarrassment. He looked again at Marion; and at last, seeing her radiant countenance, he understood that this was her achievement, that it was for her Haig would be coming unarmed to the house of his bitter foe that afternoon.

"I'm ready," he said to Thursby, with an elation he was only partly able to conceal.

Smythe was the next visitor, arriving in a state of such contrition that Marion pitied him. His jaunty air was gone. He was quite unable to respond to Marion's gentle jesting, seeing that her cheeks were still sunken and pale, that the body whose graces he had so much admired was now palpably thin under her loose clothing. He had blamed himself bitterly for the disaster that had overtaken her, and his sufferings had been real and lasting.

"If I'd been half a man I'd never have let you go on alone that day," he said after she had greeted him brightly, giving him both her hands.

"Oh, indeed!" retorted Marion. "And what would you have done?"

"Gone with you."

"But I sent you back."

"I was a fool!"

"A fool to do as I told you, Mr. Smythe?" she demanded archly.

"Yes. You didn't know what you were doing."

"But I did know what I was doing."

This come with such depth of feeling that he knew he would no longer be able to bring her news of Philip Haig.

"Then I'm glad," he said simply.

Presently she told him her story; but much was omitted, especially the keenest of her sufferings, since remorse still haunted Smythe's solemn eyes.

"And what have you been doing?" she asked.

"Trying to read and study, but it's been no use."

"And you've lost a year in your career!"

"That's nothing. I can make it up, if you've forgiven me." She gave him her hand again.

"There's nothing to forgive!" she answered warmly. "You've been a good friend to me. I owe you — more than you know — more than I can tell you — now!"

On that she rose hurriedly, and went to her room for — a handkerchief. It was quite ten minutes before she returned to finish their talk, and to tell him that he must come to see her often through the long months of winter that remained.

CHAPTER XXX

THE LAMP RELIGHTED

MARION, at the window, was the first to see him; and what she saw caused her to clutch at her throat to stifle a cry. He was not on horseback, though the roads were quite passable, but in a sleigh; and there was a jingle of sleigh bells on the frosty air. He had come with the sorrels — for her — at last!

She opened the door for him, giving him her hand — was it possible? — a little shyly. Huntington, at Haig's entrance, rose from his chair before the fire; and Claire too, clinging to the chimney, scarce able to believe that there would not be such another scene as that of one evening long ago.

Silence, a little awkward for all of them, followed Marion's greeting, while the two men stood looking at each other. Then Haig walked direct to Huntington, frankly smiling.

"How are you, Huntington? And Mrs. Huntington?"" he was saying quietly.

"All well," replied Huntington, rather stiffly, meaning to be very reserved in this business.

Claire inclined her head without speaking. Her blue eyes were round, her lips parted, and something of the old terror showed in her face, though she knew very well why Haig was there.

"Thursby has told you?" asked Haig.

"Yes," was Huntington's answer, still putting everything up to his enemy.

"Well then, Huntington, since you'll deal with Thursby now, I thought we might as well ask each other a few questions, and give straight answers."

"I'm ready," said Huntington gruffly.

"Thank you. First, did you drive that bunch of cattle off the cliff?"

"No. But did you scatter those twenty head of mine?"

"No. Both mere accidents undoubtedly. Second, did you advise setting an ambush for me?"

"No. That was — no matter who. I talked them out of it, and was sorry for it afterwards."

"But you did say you'd drive me out of the Park."

"Yes, and I'd have done it any way short of —"

"Sending me out in a coffin! But we all lost our tempers, of course."

"And with good reason on our side," retorted Huntington stoutly.

"Perhaps. But I'll ask you to remember that everything I did was open and aboveboard. If any of your cattle strayed, if any of *your* fences were cut, I had nothing to do with it."

"I believe you — now, after what Thursby's told me."

"Thank you. We make progress. But there are two things more. Who cut the fence of my winter pasture?"

For a moment Huntington was silent, his face reddening.

"I did that," he replied at length, half defiantly, but in great confusion.

"But why? There was nothing to be gained by that. There were no cattle in the pasture or near it."

Huntington hesitated, shifting his weight uneasily from his left foot to his right, and back again to the left. Then he looked at Marion, saw the appeal in her eyes, and plunged.

"I wanted to make you angry."

"To make me angry?"

"To make you do something reckless."

Haig studied him, and saw that he was dealing with a man who was in some respects, and for all his physical strength, a boy — a child. He felt his anger rising, but put it down resolutely.

"That was very foolish, Huntington!" he said, with some sharpness. "It certainly made me furious, as you saw later at the post-office."

"But you were wrong to call me a liar and a thief. And that's something you've got to —"

"Got to what?" demanded Haig quickly.

Huntington did not answer at once. Claire's face, already as pale as it could well be, became drawn and ashen, while Marion, seeing the danger, unconsciously took a step forward, as if to throw herself between the two men. For some tense seconds Huntington and Haig faced each other belligerently.

"Got to what, Huntington?" repeated Haig. "There's nothing I've *got* to do."

Huntington had not meant the "got" in the sense in which it was taken by Haig. He had begun to say, "You've got to admit that was pretty hard." But his

unfortunate pause on the uncompleted sentence had justified Haig in putting the worst possible construction on the objectionable phrase. And now Huntington could not finish it as he had intended, without seeming to back down, or weaken. Nor could he afford to drop the mischievous word for another. In his desperation he took the boldest course, and made a more aggressive speech by far than any he had rehearsed for the occasion, and forgotten.

"You've got to take that back!" he blurted out.

It was Haig's turn now to ponder deeply. His first impulse was to tell Huntington to go to the devil, and thereupon to walk out of the house. But he had come there to make peace; and he bethought himself in time that to give way to anger would only be to allow Huntington the first victory he had ever had over him. Besides — he turned toward Marion, and saw her face distorted with apprehension. That decided the issue.

"All in good time, Huntington," he said, with a smile. "Your actions certainly justified everything I said. What have you to say about your scheme to take my horse?"

Huntington groped in vain for one of the crushing retorts that he had valiantly prepared for this meeting. Then he caught Marion's eye again.

"That was a mistake." he said. "But I'm no thief and no liar."

"I grant you're honest enough, Huntington, when you stop to think. As for Sunnysides, he's settled that business for himself. And if you'll give me a straightforward answer on one more point, I'll acquit you of being a liar."

"What's that?"

"You killed my bull, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did! But it was a question of yours or mine. They were fighting, and mine was getting the worst of it."

"And it never occurred to you to let the best one win?"

"No. I was angry. It was the day that—" He caught himself, and looked in fresh alarm at Marion.

"The day that—" Haig prompted.

"No matter. I was angry. I'll pay you what the bull was worth."

"No. Settle that with Thursby. Is there anything more?"

"Nothing except the cause of the whole trouble. You took more than your share."

"We might talk all day and all night about that, and come to no understanding. But I'll tell you what I've done. I've suggested to Thursby that he and you and the rest of them go into a pool. There's enough pasture for all of you if—"

"That's an idea!" cried Huntington. "What does Thursby say?"

"He's willing. He doesn't like trouble as I—did. He'll even sell off some of his stock."

Huntington was silent a moment, looking doubtfully at Haig. Then the best of him rose to the occasion.

"I told Thursby that—I hadn't anything to take back, but that—you're a man, for all of it. And if you— Damn it! There's my hand."

"Done!" said Haig heartily.

"Oh!" cried Claire, breaking away from the mantel, to which she clung through all the interview, trembling between hope and fear. She stepped up to Haig, her eyes shining through tears.

"Mine too!" she said, offering her hand to him.

But when it was all finished there was another awkward interval of silence. For years of controversy and enmity are not so quickly resolved into perfect peace. It was Haig who brought back a certain ease to them.

"Would you mind, Mrs. Huntington, if I asked Miss Gaylord to go for a drive with me?"

"Indeed, no!"

"And if she took dinner with me? I'll bring her back early."

"If Marion thinks —"

But Marion, who had stood silent and anxious until then, did not reply to Claire's glance of inquiry. She heard the last words as if in a dream. But dreams were coming true these days; miracle followed miracle. With a stifled cry she ran past them, and into her room. There she sank down on the edge of the bed, and crossed her hands over her breast, and stared at vacancy, her face burning, a mist before her eyes. Weakness overcame her for a moment. Then she leaped to her feet, dressed quickly for the drive, and went out befurred and radiant to put her arms around Claire and kiss her.

"You'll be welcome, Haig, if you want to — to come in any time," Huntington was saying awkwardly.

"I will!" replied Haig.

Then Philip and Marion were gone, and Seth and Claire stood staring at the door.

"Oh, I'm so happy, Seth!" cried Claire at last, holding up her arms to him.

"Umph!" said Huntington, submitting to her ecstatic endearments.

The Park glittered in its robe of white; the sun shone with cold brilliancy out of a steel-blue sky; the air was still and sparkling, stinging their cheeks into a glow as they sped down the valley. Under the runners of the sleigh the dry snow sang and crackled, and flew up in a fine shower like dust of diamonds beneath the swift feet of the sorrels.

Haig gave Marion no chance to say a word while the sleigh went swinging and bounding down the road, and the fields slipped past them in a dazzling succession. When he was not leaning forward to urge the sorrels to greater speed he was talking rapidly. He told her of the scenes at the stable and the cottage on his return, elaborating the description until Marion's laughter rang above the sounds of their swift traveling. He was talking to keep up his courage, and to postpone the speech that was in his heart and that now, after all, when the time had come, filled him with doubts and fears, and seemed to him the boldest thing he had ever set himself to do. For the first time in ten years he was afraid, and doubtful of himself.

The door of the cottage was thrown open by Slim Jim, in his newest and brightest costume of blue silk. Marion smiled at him as she passed, for she could not trust herself to speak; and then she was in that room whence she had gone one day in utter dejection, praying for a miracle. She stood for a few seconds looking

around her, recognizing all the familiar objects: the bed where Haig had undergone his agonies, the table where the medicines had stood, the window and a glimpse of the slope outside, now white instead of yellowing green. There was a roaring fire, and tea things stood on the table.

Silence enveloped them while Philip helped her with her wraps, and saw her seated in an armchair before the fire. Despite the color that the cold drive had brought into her cheeks, her features were still pinched and pale. Many weeks would be required, a summer perhaps, to restore her to what she had been before her terrible experience. And yet she seemed to him more beautiful than ever. Watching her furtively and anxiously, he endured a raging conflict of emotions, recalling with a poignant feeling of shame all that he had said to her in that room and elsewhere, in return for what she had done for him. An impulse seized him to rush to the door and lock it, to turn on her savagely, forbidding her to leave him as he had forbidden her to come to him. For all the proofs he had had of her love and devotion seemed inadequate to quiet the doubts he now confessed. He found speech strangely difficult; he went out of the room twice to give quite unnecessary instructions to Jim; and returned to busy himself arranging things in the room that obviously needed no arranging.

"Thursby was good enough to go somewhere to-day, and let us have the cottage," he managed to say at length. "Do you mind if we are quite alone?"

"Philip!" she responded reproachfully. "How you talk!"

"Then we'll have tea."

He called the Chinaman, who brought in the steaming teapot, the hot milk, and the buttered toast. Marion poured the tea in silence. They drank, too, almost in silence, and nibbled at the toast, forgetful that two days before, and for three dreadful months, tea and toast and milk, served on a table laid with white linen, would have seemed like a heavenly dispensation. Their very experience in the cave, which had broken down so many barriers between them, seemed to have reared a new one that neither understood. It was Marion who made a beginning to scale that barrier.

"You have made Claire very happy, Philip," she said.

"That was easy," he answered.

"But it was grand!"

"And you too — a little?" he ventured.

"You know that, Philip!" And then, a little mischievously: "Remember I tried to make peace between you once."

"And a fine job you made of it!" he retorted.

Then they both laughed, and lapsed again into silence. But presently Haig arose, went to a cabinet standing against the wall, and brought back a faded photograph, which he handed to her.

"My father," he said.

She saw a face that seemed a little sad, but the kindest of eyes, with a half serious twinkle in them.

"The dear man!" she exclaimed softly.

"We were great friends," he said. "We used to take long walks together of a Sunday afternoon. He

was a silent man, rather, and we did not talk much, but — shall I tell you one thing he used to say to me, often?"

"Yes, Philip."

"I believed it then. But things happened to make me think that father was mistaken. For ten years I didn't believe it at all."

"What was it, Philip?"

"He used to say: 'My boy, there's only one thing in the world that's worth while. And that is love.'"

"Why, that's what Daddy always said, almost his very words!" she cried, her eyes filling.

"If I only knew —" he began.

But she could endure no more. She rose swiftly to her feet, her eyes devouring him, her arms stretched out.

"Marion!" he cried, and leaped to catch her, and folded her close, as he had clasped her in the cave. But now the arms that stole up around his neck did not fall away weakly as before, but tightened, and held him.

A long time they remained thus, in a silence broken only by the crackling of the flames, which they did not hear, and the wind rising outside the cottage, for which they did not care. At length he put his fingers under her chin, and raised her head so that he could look into her eyes.

"I believe it now!" he said.

"It's true!" she answered, so low that he scarcely heard it.

"I love you!"

"I've loved you always!"

Then even in her joy the recollection of all that she had come through to this moment brought back that quivering of her chin, which had become only too familiar to him in days past. His head sank toward her, and their lips met.

After a while he led her back to her chair, and knelt down to look up at her. For there were other difficulties. He had nothing to give her, he said; neither riches nor family nor honor nor any future of which he could be assured. She stopped him, with a hand laid gently on his lips. He held it there, kissing it. How it had toiled and hurt for him, that little hand, still rough and scarred!

"Can you ever forgive me?" he pleaded.

"There's nothing to forgive, Philip. You did not understand."

"There! You're treating me like a child again!" he protested, smiling contentedly.

"And once you scolded me dreadfully for that!"

"But you were right. I've been a child; for ten years I've been a child that thought it was a man."

She did not reply to that, fearing to wound him. So another golden silence fell between them, while he held her hands, stroking the hard, cracked skin of them. After a while he brought a chair, and sat close by her side, and told her all that had been left untold,— about his boyhood, his ambitions, his ignorance and innocence, his work in Paris and the future it seemed to hold for him; and then the girl on the Seine boat, and what he saw one night in her apartment, and his despair; his father's death, and the wanderings that fol-

lowed; and how the shy and introspective boy had become in one day a man of violence and desperation, his heart full of hatred and bitterness.

"And so I thought, Marion, that you were all alike; not alike in all things, but the virtuous more dangerous than the vicious, because more calculating and cold. You even — I thought you were the most dangerous of all. I knew you were good, but I said your goodness was only another form of selfishness, that you had been reared in luxury, and taught to expect as your right many things you had never earned and never could earn or deserve. I said — Wait, dear — I said that the man who should marry you would be nothing but a beast of burden, a slave. It was so difficult to believe you could be content with —"

"With love!" she whispered.

"But *can* you?" he demanded, a ghost of the old incredulity rising in spite of all.

"I haven't told you about Robert," she said softly. "He has wealth, and will have much more. He loves me. He offered me all, to do with it as I wished. I've known him all my life — almost. He's good too, poor Robert! But that day, after you'd told me that I must go back to New York at once, I —"

"Marion!" Haig cried.

"No, listen! I told him that day that I could never marry him. He couldn't understand — like you, Philip. He thought — dear Robert! — he thought that money — I know it's what they want most — so many women. But, Philip, dear heart! Don't you know that if a woman really loves there's nothing she won't do — on her hands and knees — to the end of

the world? And if she has love, what else is there — that matters?"

"I didn't know," he answered, "and I couldn't have believed it until — that day in the cave, when you fell ill."

He told her then of the revelation that had come to him, and how he had taken her in his arms, in a fury of love and despair.

"But I thought it was a dream!" she murmured.

"No. I found you then — and myself — and thought it was too late!"

Later, across the table, when Slim Jim had brought in the after-dinner coffee, Haig looked at her gravely, and said:

"May I become very practical for a minute, Marion?"

"Yes, but not too practical."

"Well, it's like this: I've got —"

He paused to reach for her hand, to clasp it on the cloth.

"*When,* Marion?" he asked, leaning toward her.

"Oh, we must talk with Claire about that, mustn't we?" she protested, blushing. Then softly: "She's the only mother I've got, you see. And besides, there's no —"

"No, not even a justice of the peace!" he said, laughing. "We might strap on our old snowshoes, and go to Tellurium."

"The idea!"

"Well, listen. Do you know what I've been thinking?"

She shook her head.

"Paris."

"Paris?" she repeated, a little startled, after all that he had revealed to her.

"Yes. I've got a little money in the bank in Tellurium, and I —"

"You needn't be so proud of it!" she retorted. "So have I, in New York. So you needn't think it's your money I'm after, sir!"

They laughed, and then he had both her hands across the table.

"It isn't much, I assure you," he went on. "But it will do for a while in Paris. I mean — if you will go with me — to find my old master, or another. You know, Marion, he said to me many times: 'You're going to be a painter some day, *mon petit;* you're going to do big things, if you'll work, work, work.' And so —"

"You'll paint again!" she cried. "Oh, and I shall keep house for you! You may not believe it, but I'm a splendid cook. But I've got to have salt. You must earn enough to buy salt!"

"I'll try."

At that he rose, and went again to the cabinet from which he had brought the photograph, and returned with his hands behind his back.

"What do you suppose I've got for our mantelpiece — if we have such a thing in our attic?"

"What in the world, Philip?"

"Shut your eyes, please!"

She obeyed, and in the middle of the table he set down the tattered and grimy little boot that he had carried away from the cave.

"Now open!" he commanded.

"Oh!" she cried, staring at the eloquent memento.

Then she flung back her head, with a quick indrawing of her breath, and looked up at him through a bright mist that gathered in her eyes. And her face was radiant.

He went quickly to her, and leaned down to kiss her hair, her eyes, her lips; and her arms crept once more around his neck.

CHAPTER XXXI

SANGRE DE CRISTO

LATE October in the San Luis, and the raw day near its close. Across the melancholy flats the north wind's plaintive note rose at intervals into a wailing cry. The thin grasses bent before it, the sagebrush took on new and fantastic shapes, and danced like demons to the tune. In gray-brown desolation the sand dunes rolled away to the foothills, far and violet and dim. All was cold and bleak and forbidding, and the sun itself appeared to be retiring eagerly from a scene so dreary and disheartening.

Then came magic. Sangre de Cristo, sharp against the eastern sky, began to change its hue. A pink flush came into the gleaming white. It grew deeper, darker, more vivid; it spread, and ran in richer and richer tints along the range. Now it was rose, and now vermilion, and at last a deep and living scarlet, staining the snowy slopes, and flowing like new blood down the gulches and ravines. The foothills caught the color, and the violets became purple and then red; the sand dunes caught it, and their gray-browns were overlaid with crimson; the flats too caught it, and the sagebrush bending low, and the grass quivering in the wind were touched with some reflection of that far-reaching hue. From the green along the river the color swept, indefinable and dim at first, then by degrees intensified upon the flats, across the sand dunes,

among the hills until at length it was passionate and deep and indescribable on the Sangre de Cristo peaks.

A cowboy, searching for lost mavericks, rode slowly to the top of a low sand dune, reined up his pony, and sat silent in the midst of this solemn spectacle. He was not emotional. He was looking for calves, and "sore" at not finding them, and hungry, and far from the X bar O; and night was coming on. But he sat still in his saddle, removed his flopping sombrero, and looked toward the east. Bareheaded, the wind stinging his cheek and flinging dry sand in his eyes, he gazed and wondered at the familiar but never negligible mystery of Sangre de Cristo.

But suddenly he rose in his stirrups, and shaded his eyes with his hand to make out what it was that had caught his vision in that flood of red among the dunes. Again it came, a flash of yellow in the red. It was there, and gone. And then it came and lingered, as if inviting him, like a jewel in the sand, or rather, like a challenge and a taunt.

"So you're back, are you?" cried Larkin, of the X bar O. "Well, you c'n jest stay there. I'm done with you. You ain't no horse at all, damn you! You're a devil! But I wonder —"

Then Sunnysides was gone. At the same time the light paled on the distant peaks. The wind blew colder, and swept the color off the dunes. The flats darkened under the advancing shades of night. And Larkin, muttering, put spurs to his pony, and galloped away toward supper and bed.

THE END